ALFRED

DECEMBER 50¢

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HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

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December 1966

Dear Reader:

Did you ever have the feeling that something was following you, say from year to year? The plight which perplexes me on the cover has been dogging me for months, and is getting closer. It could be construed as the image of a relentless assassin, or perhaps a brash specter. However, I am inclined to believe, judging by the calendar, that it is the more appalling presence of my recurring holiday spirit.

Naturally, one in my position cannot allow himself to be caught up by charitable feelings when maliciousness in any form provides the mainstay of his life. Who needs a kindly purveyor of mystery and suspense?

Therefore, in my annual struggle with my virtuous self, I will remain—firm—and—continue—my devotion —to mur—aaaak!—to joyful times around the fireside with family and friends, with good food and drink—and murderous plots!

There. That was entirely too close. For a moment it had me in its sentimental grip, but I have bested it. However, I do feel a trifle lighthearted, like wanting to chill a holiday celebrant . . . You may oblige me by perusing the following pages.

Alfred Hitchcock

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 11, No. 12, December 1966. Single copies 50 cents. Subscriptions $6.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $7.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Publications office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03302. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H. © 1966 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of addresses should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.

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VOLUME 11, No. 12 DECEMBER 1966

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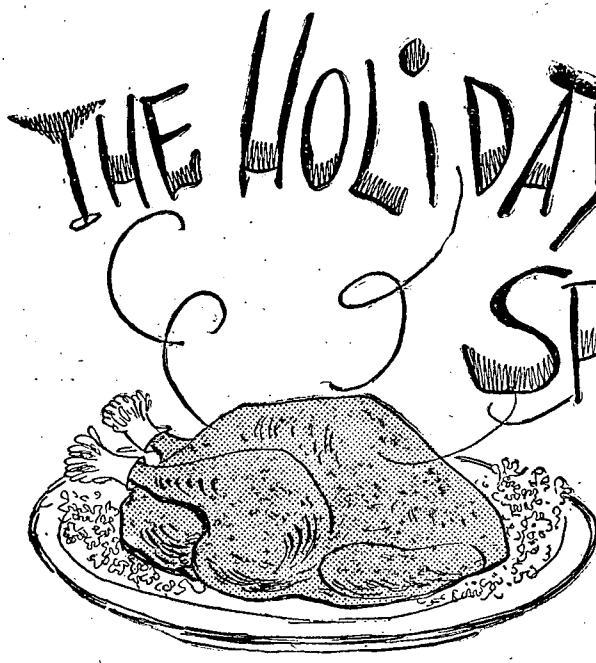
Perseverance in efforts to execute a man's last request is related to one's loyalty to the deceased.

THE HOLIDAY SPIRIT

by Max Van Derveer



RALPH HEART was dead. In a sense, it was a relief. You never actually believed that a man who had threatened to kill you as he was being taken off to prison to die in the execution chamber would be physically capable of carrying out his vow, of course. For one thing, the man was locked in a cage for the remainder of his days; for another, it was not the first time you had been threatened. You were accustomed to the threats. You were calloused. You knew the

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threats, in their utterance, were not idle, yet there was the realistic side of things, too. How was a man to kill from prison? On the other hand, with the execution completed, there always was this vague stirring of relief inside.

Gilbert Crocker stood at a smoke-filmed window, staring out on the gray November morning. His huge hands were clamped at the base of his spine and his blunt face was creased with a scowl. It was bleak outside, and cold, and there was a hint of snow in the air. He did not like any of it: November, the bleakness, the cold, the hint. There was little comfort in the fact that he stood inside a steam-warmed detective squad room in Central Police Headquarters. The day already was in his bones and he was forced to steel himself against the shudder that threatened to chase through him—just as he labored to close his ears and his mind to the friendly jostling of the two young detectives behind him.

"Will you guys cut it?" Crocker finally growled without turning from the window.

He heard the young detectives laugh, and the laughter grated against his ears. He never liked to see a man die, even Ralph Heart's kind of man, a man who had killed at least a dozen persons in his forty-two years of life. But some men had to die, just as he had to send some to those deaths. At forty-seven and with more than twenty of those spent in the Detective Division, there had been many men who had died, directly and indirectly, by his hand. It was not a good feeling. On the other hand, you could not be reflective and remorseful and be a good cop. Unfortunately, there always would be killers—men like Ralph Heart, who had been classified a mine and booby trap expert in the Army twenty years ago and then had come out of that Army to continue the practice of blowing up things, and people, with skill.

But cops were not robots. Cops had feelings. A badge, a license to carry a gun, the carrying and using of that weapon, the privilege to be a defender of Right and Justice did not automatically anesthetize a man. The defender retained emotion with his badge, license and privilege. It became merely a matter of to what degree he learned to control that emotion. And he, Crocker, down through the years, had become hardened, but he still did not like to see men die.

Nor did he think death was a laughing matter, and he turned from the window to chastise the young detectives. But the words remained unspoken when he found a woman of perhaps seventy years standing at the swinging gate in the

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low wooden railing that divided the entry from the working area of the squad room. The woman looked mildly perplexed. She was behind Anderson, the chain smoker, and Pierce, youngest in the division, and neither detective had noticed her entry. She held a large cardboard box with both hands. She was short, frail, rinsed and pleasant-looking in a fur collared coat and a hat of 1920 vintage that made Crocker think of his maternal grandmother.

He snapped his jaws together and said, "Yes? Can we help you?" The words came out as gently as was possible for him.

Anderson and Pierce turned in their chairs as the woman came through the railing gate.

"I am looking for Sergeant Gilbert Crocker," said the woman in a voice that was firm and clipped. "I was informed I could find him here." Bright, deep brown eyes darted over the detectives.

"I am Sergeant Crocker, ma'am."

The bright eyes settled on him. They were without expression. "Do you have a desk, Sergeant?"

"Right there, ma'am."

Pierce quickly left his constant companion, the paper coffee cup, and took the box from the woman.

"Well, thank you, young man," said the woman. "My, that was getting heavy."

She looked at Crocker head-on as Pierce placed the box on the scarred desk. "I represent The Benevolent Society of Sisters for the Preservation of Police Departments," she said crisply, "and the sisters have selected you as their beneficiary this Thanksgiving season. You will find a turkey in the box, Sergeant. It is for you. We give thee thanks."

She returned to the railing before Crocker recovered. "Er . . . ma'am?"

But the woman walked out of the squad room without looking back.

Anderson was the first to break. He lit a fresh cigarette from the butt in his fingertips and chuckled. From behind a new screen of smoke, he said, "Well, this just has to be your day, Sergeant."

Crocker growled and Pierce laughed. Crocker yanked open the loose lid of the box. The plucked turkey, its legs protruding like two clubs, gleamed. He banged the lid together and turned on the young detectives. Their grins were wide. Pierce slid an oblique look at Anderson. "I think, Andy, that—"

"Shut up," Crocker commanded.

The Benevolent Society of Sisters for the Preservation of Police Departments, he thought. It was his day okay. For nuts.

"Gil?"

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He shot a look at an open door to his left where their immediate superior, Lieutenant Gifford, the blintz addict, stood tall and lean. Gifford motioned to him, then his eyes found the box. "What's that?"

Pierce headed out of the squad room. He was grinning. "At least one of us is going to eat good on Thanksgiving Day, Lieutenant," he said with mock sadness. He disappeared and a moment later Crocker heard a coin clinking into the coffee vending machine in the corridor.

Crocker stomped into Gifford's tiny office.

"The box?" Gifford asked.

Reluctantly, Crocker explained.

Gifford grunted. "You get all kinds, huh? Push the door shut, Sergeant. I want to talk to you about this mugging over in Crowly Park the other night. I think Pierce bungled his investigation."

Crocker reached for the door and saw Anderson at the box. Anderson, shaking his head, had the lid open and was clucking as he stared down on the turkey.

I hope the damn thing blows up in his face, Crocker thought savagely. He closed the door.

The explosion was deafening and the concussion pitched him forward. He had the sensation of crashing into Gifford's desk, and then he was sprawled on that desk and staring down at the lieutenant who was wide-eyed on his buttocks and rammed against the wall.

Chaos, turmoil, incredulity and investigation reigned in the shattered squad room until after three o'clock in the afternoon of that gray November day. Then the detectives were temporarily regrouped and reorganized in a long-vacated municipal courtroom on the top floor of the headquarters building. Lieutenant Gifford had returned from the hospital where Detective Anderson wouldn't be smoking cigarettes for many weeks but was alive and had an excellent chance of remaining that way. The speculation began.

Pierce still was unable to believe what had happened. He cracked big knuckles and mumbled, "A nice little old lady . . ." He wagged his head. "What kind of a nut is she?"

"Point," said Lieutenant Gifford. "Is she?"

Crocker stared at his superior.

"We've scoured the city," the lieutenant went on curtly. "No society for the preservation of police departments exists."

"She has to be a kook, Giff," Crocker said flatly. "Nobody except a kook is gonna walk in here and—"

"What about Ralph Heart?"

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Pierce sat immobile and Crocker asked cautiously, "What about him? He died this mornin'."

"He also threatened to kill you. Perhaps he tried."

Crocker shook his head. "A week ago, a month ago, yeah. Not today. Not on the day he died. He would've wanted to read about it, hear it on the radio."

"But if he didn't have control over the day it was to happen?" Gifford pressed. "If all Ralph could do was get someone else to *promise* to do it? And if that someone else thought it whimsically appropriate that you die on the same day that Ralph died?"

"There isn't anyone in town who would kill for Ralph Heart," Crocker said confidently.

"Not even Joe Basket? Heart used to be one of his boys," the lieutenant went on doggedly, "and this thing has Joe's touch. Heart, a bomber, threatens to kill a cop. Why not kill the cop with a bomb? Joe thinks that way. And the little old lady, cute. Joe's touch again. Who will be humored by a bunch of police headquarters cops? Who can ask for Sergeant Gil Crocker and get pointed while other cops snicker? Who can walk unmolested, with a bomb in hand, up to the detective squad room?"

"But she was an old woman, Giff!"

"She could be thirty, Gil. She could have been disguised."

Crocker brooded. Joe "Wicker" Basket was the city's biggest live hood. Heart had been one of his boys, all right, but Heart also had talked, and Wicker had lost five other hands in addition to his bomber. Five of his men were in prison because one had a big mouth. Wicker had not looked kindly on that, and he would not kill for a man who had bleated.

Crocker shook his head again. "Heart was lucky to live long enough, even in prison, to make the chair, Giff," he said sourly. "Frankly, I expected him to get hit months ago. We all did. Even you."

"But he made it."

"Well . . . yeah."

"Lieutenant?"

The three detectives turned toward the slender, young man who had entered the courtroom. They knew him by reputation only. He had been a cop less than two years but he was the bomb squad's best man.

"We found enough, Lieutenant, to know your bomb was more of a mine than a bomb," he said. "It was small and inside the bird, naturally, but its construction was copied after the shu mine the Germans used in World War II. In this case, a trip wire was fastened to the pin and to a timing device. As the

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clock hand moved, it slowly tightened the wire and drew the pin gradually from the fuse. At an appointed time, the pin was pulled totally free and you had your bomb."

The bomb expert paused for significance, then said, "One other thing. We found traces of rust on some of the pieces. We think someone had this thing for a while. Months probably."

Crocker became acutely aware of Gifford's penetrating stare. "Okay," he conceded after a few moments. He stood and drew a long breath. "I'll hit the files."

"Heart," Gifford said flatly.

"And others," said Crocker. "There are others, you know, Lieutenant, who aren't exactly in love with us. Pierce?"

They scoured the files in the Record Room and it was six-fifteen in the evening before Crocker finally admitted defeat. He closed a folder and looked at Pierce. "Beat it."

"I can afford to buy you a beer," said the young detective.

"Not tonight."

Twenty minutes later, Crocker left the headquarters building alone. He went down the steps and around a corner of the building to his six-year-old sedan. Sliding inside was like sliding into a refrigerator, and the motor coughed for ten blocks before finally settling into a smooth rhythm. Only then did he lick his lips in anticipation of a beer and the warmth of the lights that would be waiting for him inside the mortgaged bungalow.

He turned the sedan from the boulevard into his street and slowed. His headlights had picked up a dark compact braked at the curb opposite his house. The compact looked new and empty. He frowned. He wondered if his neighbors had purchased a new car. Man, with Christmas coming on, how did people find enough money to put down on a car?

He turned into the short drive and let the sedan ease into the open garage. There were the lights in his house and he knew his wife would be stoically waiting supper. He left the garage and pushed the doors closed.

The sound of the car motor coming to life alerted him. He started to turn and was far enough around to see the headlights leap alive on the compact before the premonition of danger lifted the hackles on his neck. He flinched reflexively. The sound of the rifle shot was a sharp crack in the quiet night and the whine of the slug splattering through the wooden door near his ear sent him sprawling and rolling across the drive.

He was on his feet with his service

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gun in his hand and lumbered to the curb fast enough to see a station wagon swing into his street. The headlights of the wagon flashed across the compact as someone expertly turned the small vehicle onto the boulevard. Crocker leaped into the street. The tires of the station wagon squealed a protest and then the wagon rocked to a stop about ten feet from him.

He bolted to the wagon.

"What's the matter with you?" a raucous voice bellowed. "You wanna get killed or someth . . ."

The man tilting his head out of a half-opened window of the wagon cut off the words as Crocker leaped at him. "The compact at the corner," the detective snapped. "Did you get a look at the driver?"

"Man, what's your trouble? You drunk or—" The man again chopped off the words and started to roll up his window. Crocker put the gun against the top edge of the glass and the window stopped moving.

"It was a dame!" the man gasped.

Crocker grunted. "Was she alone?"

"Y-yeah."

"Sure?"

"Yeah . . . sure I'm sure. Well, maybe there was . . . someone else. Maybe there was . . . I mean, in the back seat . . ."

"Someone was in the back seat," Crocker graveled.

"Well . . . I mean, I ain't sure. Yeah . . . maybe there was."

"Man or woman?"

"I dunno!"

The neighborhood was alive when Crocker turned from the station wagon. Lights gleamed from the houses and doors were open. It seemed everyone on the block had heard the rifle shot. Crocker strode angrily into his drive and met his wife coming from their bungalow.

"Everything's fine, Mildred," he rumbled. "I gotta go back downtown."

Determination drew the corners of his mouth down as he drove straight to The Green Thumb on 59th Street. The stone and glass front of the flower shop gleamed with window lights, but the interior was dark and the street door was locked. Crocker kept up a steady beating on the door until he saw a large shaft of light come alive inside. Ceiling lights came on and a natty man of thirty-five years with a sunlamp tan unlocked the street door to frown out at him. The frown disappeared when the man recognized him.

Crocker pushed inside. "Eagle," he snapped, "I want Wicker."

The man lifted an eyebrow, but remained silent.

"Twenty minutes," Crocker said thickly. "Tell him I'll give him twenty minutes to be out front."

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The man sighed. "I'm not sure I can locate Mr. Basket at this hour, Sergeant," he said politely.

"You'll find him, Eagle, or that three-year assault hitch will seem like a vacation in Bermuda compared to what I'll hand you in the mornin'!"

"Violence," the man said without changing expression. "What's the world coming to these days, Sergeant? Everyone is so violent."

Joe Basket arrived at the Green Thumb exactly eighteen and one-half minutes later. Crocker was on the curb, timing the arrival, when the chauffeured sedan rolled to a stop and the rear door opened. Crocker piled into the luxurious back seat of the sedan and plopped heavily beside the stocky man of sixty years who was expensively groomed, pleasantly lotioned, and liked to appear jocose and facile.

"Sergeant," Wicker said expansively and with a deep chuckle. "Good to see you. Long time. It's lucky Eagle caught me at my place. I was just going out for the evening; got a little gathering scheduled. It's the holiday season, you know, time of the year for gatherings. I like this time of year—the cold, the holidays. The holidays put people in gay spirits. Their moods are light. I like that. Like to see people get out of the rut of everyday living."

"Knock it," said Crocker.

"Hey, now . . ." Wicker grinned and Crocker knew misgivings. The hood did not seem bothered by the bluntness, yet Crocker knew that in his keen mind he was alert to all things, including the summons by a police detective.

Wicker still attempted joviality. He popped a manicured hand on Crocker's thigh and laughed again. "Look," he said, "I hear you guys had a little blast of your own downtown today." The laughter took on stature. "Perhaps it wasn't exactly the kind of blast I have in mind tonight, but—"

"It's why you're here, Wicker," Crocker broke in thickly. "Ralph Heart."

"Ralph?" Wicker was silent for a moment before he said, "Surely, Sergeant, you don't think Ralph had—"

"Somebody tried again about an hour ago. Tried to make a hit on me with a rifle. Earlier today I figured we had a nut. Not now. The rifle puts a new light on things."

"Yeah?" Wicker looked serious and pulled on his lower lip with a thumb and forefinger. "Two attempts, huh?" I can see how you're thinkin', Sergeant, but how can you tag a guy who is already dead?"

"The guy had friends."

"Yeah." Wicker nodded. "I'm glad you used the past tense, Sergeant. Ralph *had* friends, okay, but

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in the parlance of some of my . . . er, associates, Ralph Heart became a rat fink. You know?"

"I don't *know*," Crocker said bluntly.

The hood seemed to give it some thought, then he asked carefully, "What do you want from me? You want me to nose around a little, put out some feelers?"

"Lay off, Wicker. That's what I want you to do."

"I plead innocent, friend!" The hood regarded Crocker steadily for a few seconds before he said, "Truth. I ain't leanin'. You know that. If I was leanin', you'd be dead. If not now, then in the next few seconds."

Crocker left the luxury of the sedan.

"Hey!"

Crocker snapped around and looked at the underworld kingpin who was leaning into an open window.

The kingpin was deadpan. Then suddenly he grinned. "They tried to get you with a turkey, huh? Fancy. I like that bird idea. It'd be a nice gesture, take a flock of turkeys to the boys downtown. Distribute them. I bet you guys would appreciate that. You cops don't make much dough and—"

"You've had your warning, Wicker."

"Sure, Sergeant."

The hood nodded, winked and kept grinning. Then the black sedan rolled away from Crocker without a sound, and he was left alone on the curb. Cold seeped into his bones quickly. He jammed his hands deep into his coat pockets and growled. He believed Wicker. If Wicker wanted him, Wicker would have him by now. There were a couple of other things he had to accept, too. The potential killer knew he had escaped the bomb blast, and the potential killer knew him well enough to know where he lived. The potential killer could not have found the address in a phone book. His was an unlisted number. So . . .

Who was the grandma?

Why did she want him dead?

Crocker cursed. Cops were not supposed to be confronted with mysteries. Mysteries were for storybooks. Everything was supposed to be laid out for a cop. All he had to do was put the pieces together. Crocker cursed again and started across the avenue to his aged sedan. The headlights hit him fast and he looked up. The car was bearing down on him, taking dead aim. He leaped back. Something caught a trouser leg and spun him off his feet. He went down hard, and then he sat there in the street and swore viciously as he watched the taillights of the compact disappear.

Now he knew something else

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about his potential slayer. She—or he—had guts and perseverance. Instead of fleeing earlier, she—or he—had returned to the scene of a shooting, found a cop still alive, then trailed the cop.

The night trick boys were a fountain of questions about the explosion when he arrived at headquarters. He turned a deaf ear to them and pounded into the Record Room. His mood was sour and he slammed doors until he had what he wanted: Ralph Heart's file. He had repeatedly gone over the file that afternoon, but now he knew he had missed something. There had to be a connection between Heart—although dead—and the attempts on his life.

He forced himself to read the file methodically. When he found what he needed it was so obvious. Ralph Heart had been married. There was a residence address for Mrs. Mavis Heart. He almost ran to Traffic Department. Mavis Heart also owned a compact car.

A short time later, Crocker drove past the address, braked against the curb in front of a small corner grocery store and sat for a few seconds scrutinizing the neighborhood. It was lower middle class and quiet in the fine snow the night now was spitting. The street was shadowed and the store on the corner was closed.

He left the sedan and walked through the cold and the snow to the house, a lumpy, rambling structure of two stories. The only light came from the windows across the front on the ground floor. He went up on a porch and put his thumb against a door buzzer.

Mavis Heart wore a red blouse, tight-fitting slacks, and flats, and seemed much heavier than during the days of her husband's trial. Her face was puckered and she held the door against her plumpness as she stared out at Crocker. Suddenly the door was closing. He put a hand against it.

"Do I have to call a cop?" Mavis screeched.

"I am a cop, Mavis. Remember?"

"You're a murderer! You killed my husband!"

"You own a compact car. I want to see it."

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"I'm gonna scream, and loud."

Abruptly, he allowed Mavis Heart to close the door. He heard a lock snap home, and then he stood in frustration and contemplation. He knew he was walking a very thin strip of ice. He could accuse this woman, he could question her, he might even find a rifle, yet he could not force his way into her home. Nor could he take her downtown. A good lawyer would have her in his custody in five minutes, and could crucify a cop, the entire department —especially if the cop were proven wrong, and right now the latter was a huge possibility. Mavis Heart might be capable of disguise, of aging herself, but she could not shorten or thin her body, and the grandma who had brought the turkey-bomb to headquarters had been small and frail.

Crocker pulled in a deep breath suddenly and left the porch. He crossed crisp grass, then stopped on a cracked concrete driveway. There was a garage to his left. Would he find a dark compact inside? He started back there and stopped again. If Mavis Heart wanted to kill him, what better excuse would she need than shooting down a prowler who was attempting to enter her garage?

Crocker turned out of the driveway and walked quickly through the fine snow toward his sedan. Were narrowed eyes trained on him now? Was there a rifle muzzle arching down until it was pointed straight at a spot in the middle of his back and just slightly to the left of his spine?

He exhaled sharply as he drove away from the curb.

Three things harassed Crocker the following morning. The day was bitter cold, he could not question a new widow, and he did not have a woman of seventy years who wanted him dead.

He braked for a stoplight and sat thumping the steering wheel in deep thought. He was at the head of the line of traffic and his eyes automatically surveyed the scene before him, cataloguing little things. When they found the enormous neon sign advertising the grocery supermarket in the next block, he jerked.

Thirty minutes later he again was braked in front of the corner grocery in the residential neighborhood. Mavis Heart's home was three houses to his right. He left the sedan and entered the market, a small market with four employees. Crocker picked the bearish man behind the meat counter.

Was the man acquainted with a Mavis Heart?

Sure. She lived right up the street. Three doors.

Did Mavis Heart trade regularly

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in this store? Employees know her?

Yeah.

Had Mavis Heart purchased a turkey sometime within the week?

Naw—but her mother did. Old Mrs. Done.

Her mother!

Sure. Mavis and her mother lived together in that big house . . . .

Crocker put his thumb on the door buzzer outside Mavis Heart's front door. The door remained closed. He shuffled and continued to push the buzzer for another full minute before beginning a methodical check of the neighborhood. He was keyed and agitated now, but he felt more like a cop. He was on familiar ground. Legwork, quick, simple questions were a part of his life. He expected the cool receptions, the outright rebuffs, the flashes of irritation he received at the doors, and he rolled with them until he found a woman who told him Mavis Heart had left her house, presumably to go to her job, at seven-thirty that morning.

How did the woman know Mavis had left the house?

The woman had watched her drive away.

In what kind of car?

Well, one of those little cars, one of those beetle-looking foreign cars.

And where did Mavis work?

The woman shrugged.

Mavis Heart lived with her mother, right?

So?

Crocker frowned. "I've been to the house, but no one answered."

"The old lady left too," the woman interrupted. "I seen her. She left the house maybe thirty minutes after Mavis. I seen her get on the bus."

Crocker drove to the headquarters building and found Pierce and Gifford alone in the temporary squad room. Gifford ordered an immediate pickup of Mavis Heart and her mother, but before either detective could set the operation in motion a uniformed desk cop appeared in the doorway. He almost filled the entry. He also seemed on the edge of disintegration. His eyes were round and unblinking, his face muscles twitched, his color was high, and he didn't seem to know what to do with his hands.

"B-behind me . . . Lieutenant," he said in a voice that broke.

Then he was inside the courtroom and the short, elderly woman had stepped out from behind his bulk to stand frail and prim just out of his reach. Her brown eyes were bright as she surveyed the three detectives. The eyes settled on Crocker and her mouth thinned in satisfaction. She wore the same aged, fur-collared coat, open down the front, the same ancient hat, and a

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large, scuffed purse dangled from her left wrist. The purse was open. In her right hand, held delicately between a thumb and forefinger, was a small tube filled with a liquid.

The cop stammered, "Sh-she got me at the desk, Lieutenant. Sh-she . . . says that's soup in the tube. Nitro. Sh-she made me bring her up here . . . or she was gonna blow everybody downstairs to hell!"

"Easy, Murph," Gifford said in a voice that was flat and just above a whisper.

Crocker heard Gifford take a step and saw the woman tighten. "I'll take it, Giff," he said, forcing a calmness that belied the pounding of his heart. He kept his eyes on the woman. "Be very careful with that stuff, Mrs. Done," he said.

She almost smiled. "I understand nitroglycerin is quite dangerous, Sergeant. I understand if I drop it, or even shake the bottle violently, it might—"

"Don't you want to give it to me?" Crocker asked, cautiously extending a hand.

"I do not," snapped Mrs. Done. "I came here to kill you. It's a pity these other three gentlemen must die too, but I can't allow them to leave now."

"And you?" Crocker said, frantically searching his mind for any out.

"I am quite prepared to die."

"But I don't understand," Crocker said. Could he keep her talking? Could he lull her into a moment of dropping her guard? He needed at least one second to cover the distance that separated them and another to get his hand under the tube. Two seconds. They still might die even if he were successful, but he had to take that chance.

"You don't understand?" Mrs. Done lifted eyebrows and for an instant Crocker felt as if he were being silently reprimanded by a schoolteacher. Then she said crisply, "Well, it's really quite simple, Sergeant. I've decided to take this entire matter into my own hands, that's all. Frankly, this running all over the city in attempts to kill you is tiring for a woman of my age. I am now taking the direct route."

Crocker drew a breath, not quite sure he should believe what he had heard. "Ah . . . Mrs. Done, I—"

"Please do not interrupt," she said coolly. The bright, dark eyes bored into him. "You know you must die because you killed Ralph. Ralph was very good to me and my daughter. He provided well and—"

"But I didn't kill Ralph, Mrs. Done. The state did."

"You provided him for the state."

"That's my job."

She nodded. "And my task now is to see that Ralph's final wish is carried out. It's the least I can do

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for him." She drew a breath. "Sergeant, please understand that I am an old woman. I have lived my life. When you had Ralph taken away, I vowed to help him. He asked that you die, so you are to die. I listened to Mavis in the beginning. I went along with that rather silly idea of putting one of Ralph's old bombs in a turkey and delivering it to you. I went along with attempting to shoot you. I went along with following you to that flower shop and attempting to run you down with the car. It was all such a waste of time, so indirect, and with no result. I could have got you last night when you came to the house, but I didn't know it was you until it was too late. So now I am doing this my way. Mavis is not to be involved. She is a good girl. She—"

"Mrs. Done?"

Crocker had hoped to throw her off balance with the interruption. He had hoped to produce seconds of confusion in her mind—the two seconds he needed to reach her—but she remained alert and on guard.

She extended her arm in front of her, allowing the tube to dangle from the thumb and forefinger. Crocker saw the uniformed cop flinch, heard Gifford grunt, and knew that somewhere behind him Pierce was standing like stone. Mrs. Done's mouth became set in a fixed smile. She looked straight at Crocker and he felt the perspiration pop from his pores.

"Sergeant? Lieutenant? Hey, where are they hidin' you guys these days?"

The boisterous voice, followed by the echoing chuckle in the corridor outside the courtroom, made Crocker jerk. He became frozen in a half crouch and all he could wonder was why Mrs. Done had not dropped the tube. Then he gaped in amazement as Wicker Basket swept into the room with a flourish and extended his arms in a grand gesture. Wicker grinned broadly and turned back to the door without even seeming to comprehend what he had interrupted.

"Right in here, boys," he boomed. "Here they are."

Crocker could not believe his eyes. Five men, all well-groomed, all well-known to every man in the Detective Division, paraded inside. Each carried a large, topless, cardboard carton, and each carton was capped with a cellophane-wrapped turkey.

"Along the wall, boys," Wicker said magnanimously. "There's seventy-two turkeys in those boxes, Sergeant."

The five men placed the large cartons side by side in a neat row along the wall.

Wicker beamed at Crocker. "I liked the idea last night. The more

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I thought about it, the better I liked it: turkeys for the boys downtown. Cops don't make much green and it's the holiday season and . . . Hey, what's goin' on here?"

His eyes widened slightly and his head shot forward as he seemed to see Mrs. Done for the first time. He stared for a few seconds and then he came forward. "Hey, I know you," he said to the woman. "You're Ralph Heart's mother-in-law. I remember you. Ralph used to work for me. Don't you remember me, Mrs. Done? Wicker Basket?"

Crocker was afraid to look at her as she said, "I certainly do remember you, Mr. Basket. You are a fine gentleman. You always were very good to Ralph."

Wicker had reached Mrs. Done but his eyes danced in puzzlement as he took in Crocker. "What's the matter with you, Sergeant, hunched over that way? You catch a cold in your back or—"

"That's soup in the tube, Wicker," Crocker said carefully. He was confused. He couldn't believe Wicker had walked blindly into the temporary squad room. That wasn't Wicker. Wicker never walked blindly into anything. And there had to be mass confusion downstairs. Mrs. Done had taken Murphy from his desk with a tube of nitro. Word would spread fast. Every cop in the building had to know by now what had happened. So how had Wicker and his henchmen got past the turmoil? *Why* had they been allowed to pass?

The room sweltered in a death silence. Crocker took in the five hoods who had deposited their cargo along the wall and now stood protectively over each carton. Their faces were impassive. Crocker brought his stare back to Wicker, but the expensively dressed gangster was staring at the woman.

"What are you doing this for, Mrs. Done?" he asked, sounding like a patient man mildly rebuking an erring mother-in-law. He drew a breath. "These guys aren't bad guys, even if they are cops. How come you're—"

"Sergeant Crocker killed Ralph," she said thinly.

"Hmmm." Wicker seemed to consider it. "I see. Crocker had Ralph sent up, okay, and now you're going to kill him, huh?"

"I don't want you to die, Mr. Basket, or any of your friends. You always were good to Ralph. So I'll wait until you leave the room. But I'll have to ask you to leave now, please."

"Well, sure, Mrs. Done. Anything to oblige a lady. I'll just be trottin' along."

Crocker watched Wicker start to turn from the woman, and then

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suddenly Wicker's left hand clamped down hard on her wrist and his right hand was under the tube.

Crocker sagged and almost went down. "Damn . . ." he breathed.

"Hey, take this stuff, will you?" Wicker pleaded.

He stood with his left hand still clamped on Mrs. Done's wrist, but she was not struggling. He held the tube gingerly in the other hand, extending it to Crocker.

Gifford sighed and said, "Pierce, get Carr up here from the bomb squad! Then find Mavis Heart!"

Crocker shook his head. "You fool, Wicker. We all could have been killed."

"Don't be too rough on the old girl, Sergeant, huh? After all, the only thing she's done is scare you a little."

"We've got a man in the hospital who was more than scared."

Wicker considered it briefly. "Yeah, I forgot about him, I guess. Well, he's gonna live, isn't he? You send his bill to me. Hey, are you gonna take this stuff or do I have to hold it all day?"

"Just don't move around too much, Wicker," Crocker said. "We'll have a man up here in seconds who knows how to handle it."

The bomb squad's best man arrived and removed the tube. Only then did Crocker draw his first easy breath of the last several minutes.

"Wicker," he said, looking at the gangster, "why did you do that?"

Wicker looked puzzled but Crocker knew that, inside, the big man was pleased with himself.

"You knew," Crocker said. "They had to tell you downstairs, so why did you come up here when—"

"Aw, hell, Sergeant," Wicker Basket broke in with a huge grin, "you know how it is. These are the holidays. I'm in the right frame of mind. Anyway," his grin became one-sided and his eyes became crafty, "I think I'm gonna like the idea of you cops owing me for a change."

Crocker flinched. "We don't owe you a thing, Wicker! Get that out of your craw right—"

"Sergeant!" the hood said, swelling with feigned surprise. "Where's your holiday spirit?"

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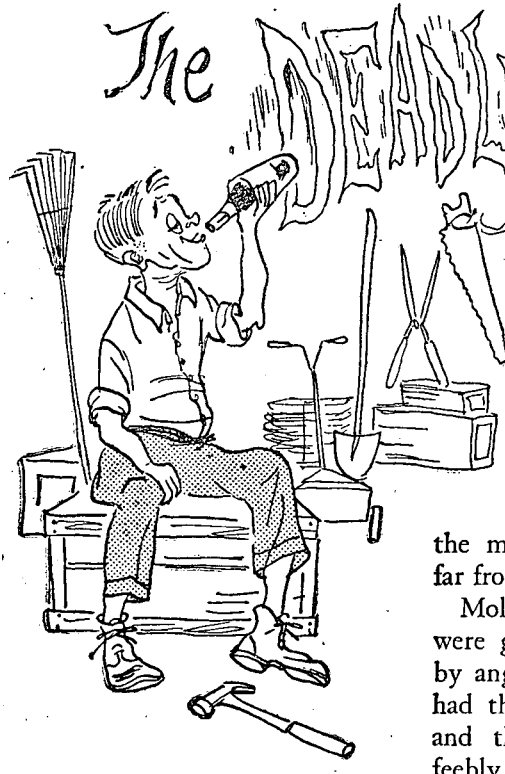
As with a seesaw, the insertion of a foreign element into an existent equilibrium invariably disturbs that balance.

The DEADLY Handyman

By J. A. Mas



THE thick fog rolled up to the black sedan parked on a seldom used back road on state hospital grounds. It wrapped itself around the vehicle, forming a snug, cozy cocoon for the lovers in the car. At the moment, however, they were far from amorous.

Moloney's middle-age wrinkles were grooved deeper into his face by anger and frustrated desire. He had the overhead lamp turned on and the interior of the car was feebly illuminated by a pale yellow light.

"What are you trying to prove, Bea? First you say you love me and then you act as if—as if I were dirt." He smacked the steering wheel in disgust. "Look at me!" he snapped.

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The girl turned from the fog-opaqued window and faced her superior. Her blue eyes were cold with contempt. She was still in uniform and her hair was startlingly red against the white of her attendant's outfit.

"I'm looking," she said, "and I don't like what I see."

Now it was Moloney who turned his face to the window, his thin lips tight with impatience. He sighed. "All right. I'll play along with you. What is it you see that you don't like?"

"I see a jackass who thinks just because he is my supervisor he can take what he wants, when he wants it!"

His head snapped back around. "Now look, Bea—"

"No. You look, Henry. I've told you before. If you want me, marry me. Otherwise, forget it."

"Take it easy, Bea," Moloney pleaded. "You know I want to marry you. And it won't be long. My wife will probably—"

"Outlive you," Bea interrupted again.

"She's very sick," Moloney said.

"Get rid of her, Henry," the lovely girl demanded unexpectedly.

There was a short, stunned silence while the thought, the dreadful meaning sank in. The fog lifted for a second, revealing silhouettes of trees huddled by the roadside and dark underbrush; a sliver of moon escaped briefly from the voluminous clouds, then the fog settled upon them once more and they were again isolated from the outside world.

Moloney trembled with mingled desire and fear. At last, he nodded. "Okay," he said hoarsely.

"When?"

"Very soon. I have an idea."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're not putting me on?"

"No, Bea. I swear it."

She smiled, and her beautiful face was lit with a soft inner radiance. She lifted her smooth, warm arms to him. "Come to mama, pet," she said, snapping off the light.

The fog was very kind, indeed.

Moloney's office was bright and warm with the morning sun, and heady with the perfume of the lilac bushes that ringed ward seven. From his desk he could see the thin ribbon of road that curved through the maple and oak trees, and divided the wards of his group. His thick fingers drummed on the desk while he watched Bea's luxurious new white car approach. Briefly he wondered how she could afford the payments for the convertible on her attendant's salary. Then his feeling of unease returned, obscuring the question.

Last night he had lied. There

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was no plan. She had accepted his word temporarily, but he couldn't fool her for long, and he was worried about the repercussions. Bea's temper was as ugly, when she didn't get her way, as she was beautiful. If only he could think of something; how long could he stall her?

Her car loomed closer, disappeared around the bend. Tires crunched in the parking lot on the west side of the building. Her heels were a loud staccato on the wooden floor of the ward; the patients would be looking at her swaying hips with unconcealed hunger in their eyes. How long could he hold her off? He just had to think of something.

"Good morning, Mr. Moloney," Bea said, swinging into the office. On the ward they addressed each other formally. She bent to lift the sign-in-and-out sheet from its peg on the wall, her back to Moloney.

"Good morning, Miss Keseler," he answered shakily.

Bea turned, smiling, obviously enjoying the effect she had on him. "Tell me when you are going to do it," she said abruptly.

Moloney's heart gave a couple of heavy thumps. He frowned. "We can't talk about that here. You've gone daft?"

"Nuts!" she said. "All your attendants, including the big shot staff attendant, are in the linen room guzzling free coffee, and you know it."

Now what? he thought. *What am I going to tell her?*

There was a slight commotion and an attendant, a new man named Brown, appeared suddenly at the door. Moloney breathed easier, thankful for the slightest reprieve. With Brown was a small, slim patient who was unsteady on his feet and kept reaching for a half-empty bottle of wine the attendant held in his hand. The attendant pushed the patient's hands away and gave the bottle to Moloney.

"Where'd you get the wine, Rivers?" Moloney asked, not really expecting an answer. Few patients would divulge their source of supply, and Rivers was a natural-born clam. As expected, he just shrugged and smiled sheepishly at Moloney.

"Okay, Brown," Moloney said, "take him to four. A couple of days in a locked ward should dry him out."

Moloney watched their departure, his eyes narrowed in thought, unaware that Bea had resumed her interrogation.

"You're not listening to me. What is it?" she demanded.

"I'm not going to do it, Bea," said Moloney, his voice thick with suppressed excitement.

Bea stared at him, her face ex-

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pressionless, fire smouldering in her eyes. "You're not?" The words were deceptively soft.

"No," he said, enjoying his moment. "Rivers will."

A puzzled frown drove the blankness from her face. "Rivers?" She sounded skeptical.

"Yes. I've read his medical history. His father was an alcoholic who killed his wife in a drunken rage and almost killed Rivers, too. Rivers was terrified of him from all the savage beatings, and he was in the room when his father strangled his mother.

"His father died in prison. Haunted by nightmares, Rivers became an alcoholic, too. The dreams were always the same: he kept witnessing his father throttling his mother. Rivers also has a history of assault and robbery, committed while intoxicated. He always picked on older men; probably afraid a younger person would put up a fight."

"What's that got to do with—"

Moloney raised his hand. "Keep your voice down, Bea. When he's drunk, he is quite unstable, can be cheerful, or in a rage, or just dejected. But he's a good worker, even with a few drinks in him. Everybody knows that I take him to my house frequently to do odd jobs for me—uh, as part of his therapy, of course."

"I still don't see how that is going to help us," Bea said. "Are you stalling me?"

Moloney shook his head. "Rivers can never remember what occurs while he is drunk. Usually I give him a few drinks when I have him home. He works better. Tomorrow I'll give him much more. I'll get him riled up at my wife in some way. I can do it. I can get him killing mad. Afterwards, I'll scuffle with him enough to make it look good. No one will suspect."

Bea looked at Moloney with new respect.

"Now," Moloney said, "I want you to tell the rest of those loafers to get out of the linen room and get this ward cleaned up."

"Yessir," Bea answered meekly.

Moloney took Rivers home with him the next day, supposedly to help clean out the garage. They had barely begun when Moloney pulled out a partially filled bottle of brandy from a box containing old magazines.

"A few drops of this stuff will make the work a lot easier for us," Moloney said, extending the bottle.

Rivers grinned in appreciation. He took a deep swallow from the bottle and reluctantly returned it to Moloney.

Moloney drank some, then frowned at the bottle. "Queer. What a queer taste there is to it.

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Did you notice it too, Rivers?" He sniffed at the bottle opening.

"No, sir. It tasted fine to me," the alcoholic replied.

Moloney shook his head. "No, it's not fine. There's something wrong with it. It's been tampered with, and I know who has been doing the tampering."

Moloney went out and emptied the bottle at the edge of the lawn.

"Hey!" Rivers started to protest, but it was too late. He fell silent, watching regretfully the last of the liquor disappearing into the ground.

Moloney came back to the garage, dropped the empty bottle back into the box of magazines. "It was poisoned," he told Rivers. "My wife is back to her old tricks."

Rivers shook his head reproachfully, his eyes sorrowful over the criminal spoilage of liquor. Then Moloney winked at him conspiratorially.

"But I have another," he said, digging into another box. "This one hasn't been opened yet, so it's got to be good."

Rivers' sad eyes lit up. "Say, you're really foxy, Mr. Moloney. So your wife is really trying to do you in, huh? Too bad. She seemed such a sweet lady."

"Isn't that the truth, though? You never can tell who has murder in his heart, can you?" Moloney said, putting the new bottle of brandy into Rivers' eager hands.

Little work was done while Moloney told the patient about the many times his wife had tried to kill him. The only reason he didn't have her committed was because he felt sorry for her, but he realized she would be better off dead. It would end her own physical suffering and her overwhelming hate for him. Rivers kept nodding in sympathetic, if befuddled, agreement.

"She hates me. And she hates every one of you fellows I bring home to help me keep the house in shape for her. Now she has taken to trying to poison us," Moloney said, including Rivers as a possible victim of his bloodthirsty wife.

"If she were dead we would have nothing to worry about. You could come here all the time and have a drink with me. And we could eat what we want, never afraid of being harmed."

"That would be swell," Rivers agreed thickly.

"Then you'll help me?"

"Help you what, Mr. Moloney?"

Moloney swallowed his exasperation. "Get rid of her. I can bring you here every day, and we can drink all we want, and have all the fun we want. What do you say?"

"I shay—say we kill the witch. Oops! Sorry, Mr. Moloney. I mean, sure. Let's do it."

Rivers was getting unsteady on

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his feet. Moloney took the almost empty bottle from him, telling him they would celebrate after finishing this extra job they had to do.

"Le's kill her fas', then," Rivers growled. He picked up a heavy hammer and slung it on his belt. "Then le's cel'bra'."

Moloney led him to the house. He stopped by the door; Rivers remained slightly to the rear, swaying uncertainly, his hand on the hammer in his belt. Ignoring his wife, Moloney let his eyes travel around the shabbily furnished livingroom. His wife was right. The house needed new furniture, new rugs, new everything, including a new mistress. The curtains, brittle with age, were parted and the sun streamed into the neat, scrupulously clean room.

Moloney's attention finally focused on his wife. She was, as usual, sitting in her rocking chair. There was a steaming pot of coffee on the table before her, surrounded by three fragile cups. How did she know when they were going to come in? Moloney wondered briefly. There was a warm smile of greeting on her face, but to Moloney it appeared insipid and weak. His lips twisted in a cruel grin which stole the warmth from her smile.

"You boys are on time. The coffee is hot," she said timidly.

Moloney nodded to Rivers, his heart pounding in anticipation. The alcoholic stumbled toward the woman, paused momentarily, struck her suddenly with his open hand, before she could cry out. Then he picked her up and threw her onto the decrepit sofa. She moaned weakly, a trickle of blood oozing from her cut lip. Rivers slid the hammer from his belt and raised it to deliver the death blow—but his arm froze. His face screwed up in a look of utter anguish and his body began to tremble violently.

Moloney, seeing his plan floundering, became panicky. "Hit her!" he shrieked.

Rivers lowered the hammer, a sob rattled deep in his throat.

Moloney cursed, shoved Rivers aside, then grabbed his wife by the throat and squeezed. Her eyes were open wide, bright with terror. She struggled helplessly.

"Die! Die!" Moloney ranted.

"Mom!" The call was drawn out in a terrible scream immediately behind Moloney. "Mom! Don't hurt her, Pa. Please!"

Too late, Moloney remembered that screwball, Rivers, and his nightmares—and the hammer. Before he could turn, there was a swift movement behind him, and the world erupted in a fierce, blinding light, followed by total and eternal darkness.

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Protectors of our rights must surely have patience with the incredible personages whom they must suffer in the course of their duties.

By Lawrence Block

JUST a few minutes before twelve on one of the best Sunday nights of the summer, a clear and fresh-aired and moonlit night, Thomas M. "Lucky Tom" Carroll collected his black snapbrim hat from the hat-check girl at Cleo's Club on Broderick Avenue. He tipped the girl a crisp dollar bill, winked briskly at her, and headed out the front door. He was fifty-two, looked forty-five, felt thirty-nine. He flipped his expensive cigar into the gutter and strolled to the Cleo's Club parking lot next door, where his very expensive, very large car waited in the parking space reserved for it.

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When he had settled himself behind the wheel with the key fitted snugly in the ignition, he suddenly felt that he might not be alone.

Hearing a clicking sound directly behind him, Carroll stiffened, and then the little man in the back seat shot him six times in the back of the head. While the shots echoed deafeningly, the little man opened the car door, jammed his gun into the pocket of his suit jacket, and scurried off down the street as fast as he could, which was not terribly fast at all. He peeled his white gloves from his tiny hands, and managed to slow down a bit. Holding the white gloves in one hand, he looked rather like the White Rabbit rushing frenetically to keep his appointment with the Duchess.

Finney and Mattera caught the squeal. The scene was packed with onlookers, but Finney and Mattera didn't share their overwhelming interest in the spectacle. They came, they looked, they confirmed there were no eyewitnesses to question, and they went over to the White Tower for coffee. Let the lab boys sweat it out all night, searching through a coal mine for a black cat that wasn't there. Fingerprints? Evidence? Clues? A waste of time.

"Figure the touch man is on a plane by now," Finney said. "Be on the West Coast before the body's cold."

"Uh-huh."

"So Lucky Tom finally bought it. Nice of him to pick a decent night for it. You hate to leave the stationhouse when it's raining. But a night like this, I don't mind it at all."

"It's a pleasure to get out."

"It is at that," said Finney. He stirred his coffee thoughtfully, wondering as he did so if there were a way of stirring your coffee without seeming thoughtful about it. "I wonder," he said, "why anyone would want to kill him."

"Good question. After all, what did he ever do? Strong-arm robbery, assault, aggravated assault, assault with a deadly weapon, extortion, three murders we knew of and none we could prove—"

"Just trivial things," said Finney.

"Undercover owner of Cleo's Club, operator of three illegal gambling establishments—"

"Four."

"Four? I only knew three." Mattera finished his coffee. "Loan shark setup, number two man in Barry Beyer's organization, not too much else. We did have a rape complaint maybe eight years ago—"

"A solid citizen."

"The best."

"A civic leader."

"None other."

"It was sure one peach of a pro-

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fessional touch," Finney said. "Six shots fired point-blank. Revenge, huh?"

"Something like that."

"No bad blood coming up between Beyer and Archie Moscow?"

"Haven't heard a word. They've been all peace and quiet for years. Two mobs carve up the city instead of each other. No bad blood spilled in the streets of our fair city. Instead of killing each other they cool it, and rob the public."

"True public spirit," said Finney. "The reign of law and order. It makes one proud to serve the cause of law and order in this monument to American civic pride."

"Shut up," Mattera said.

Approximately two days and three hours later, three men walked out the front door at 815 Cameron Street. The establishment they left didn't have an official name, but every cabdriver in town knew it. Good taste precludes a precise description of the principal business activity conducted therein; suffice it to say that seven attractive young ladies lived there, and that it was neither a nurses' residence nor a college dormitory.

The three men headed for their car. They had parked it next to a fire hydrant, supremely confident that no police officer who noted its license number would have the temerity to hang a parking ticket on the windshield. The three men were trusted employees of Mr. Archer Moscow. They had come to collect the week's receipts, and, incidentally, to act as a sort of quality control inspection team.

As they reached the street, a battered ten-year-old convertible drew up slowly alongside them. The driver, alone in the car, leaned across the front seat and shot the center man in the chest with a sawed-off shotgun. Then he quickly scooped an automatic pistol from the seat and used it to shoot the other two men, three times each. He did all of this very quickly, and all three men were very dead before they hit the sidewalk.

The man stomped on the accelerator pedal and the car leaped forward as if startled. The convertible took the corner on two wheels and as suddenly slowed its speed to twenty-five miles an hour. The little man drove four blocks, parked the car and raised the convertible top. He disassembled the sawed-off shotgun and packed it away in his thin black attache-case with the automatic, removed the jumper wire from the ignition switch, and left the car. Once outside the car he removed his white gloves and put them, too, inside the attache case. His own car was parked right around the corner.

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He put the attache case into his trunk, got into his car and went home.

Finney and Mattera got the squeal again, only this time it was a pain in the neck, good weather notwithstanding. This time there were eyewitnesses, and sometimes eyewitnesses can be a pain in the neck, and this was one of those times. One of the eyewitnesses reported that the killer had been on foot, but this was a minority opinion. All of the other witnesses agreed there had been a murder car. One said that it was a convertible, another that it was a sedan, and a third that it was a panel truck. There were two other minority opinions as well. One witness said there had been three killers. Another said one. The rest agreed on two, and Finney and Mattera figured three sounded reasonable, since two guns had been used, and someone had to drive the car, whatever kind of car it was. Then they asked the witnesses if they would be able to identify the killer or killers, and all of the witnesses suddenly remembered that this was a gangster murder, and what was apt to happen to eyewitnesses who remembered what killers looked like, and they all agreed, strange as it may seem, that they had not gotten a good look at the killers at all.

Finney had to ask the stupid questions, and Mattera had to write down the stupid answers, and it was an hour before they got over to the White Tower.

"Eyewitnesses," said Finney, "are notoriously unreliable."

"Eyewitnesses are a pain in the neck."

"True. Three more solid citizens—"

"Three of Archie Moscow's solid citizens this time—Joe Dant and Third-Time Charlie Weiss and Big Nose Murchison. How would you like to have a name like Big Nose Murchison?"

"He doesn't even have a nose now," said Finney. "And couldn't smell much if he did."

"How do you figure it?"

"Well, as they said on Pearl Harbor Day—"

"Uh-huh."

"This do look like war, sir."

"Mmmmm," said Mattera. "Doesn't make sense, does it? You would think we would have heard something. That's usually the nice thing about being a cop. You get to hear things, things the average citizen may not know about. You don't always get to do anything about what you hear, but you hear about it. We're only in this business because it gives us the feeling of being on the inside."

"I thought it was for the free coffee," said the counterman. They

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drank, pretending not to hear him.

"We're going to look real bad, you know," Finney said. "If Moscow and Beyer have a big hate going, they're going to spill a lot of blood, and the chance of solving any of those jobs isn't worth pondering." He broke off suddenly, pleased with himself. He was fairly certain he had never used *pondering* in conversation before.

"And," he went on, "with various killers flying in and out of town and leaving us with a file of unsolved homicides, the newspapers may start hinting that we are not the best police force in the world."

"Everybody knows we're the best money can buy," said Mattera.

"Isn't it the truth," said Finney.

"And what bothers me most," said Mattera, "is the innocent men who will die in a war like this. Men like Big Nose, for example."

"Pillars of the community."

"We'll miss them," said Mattera.

The following afternoon, Mr. Archer Moscow used his untapped private line to call the untapped private line of Mr. Barry Beyer. "You had no call to do that," he said.

"To do what?"

"Dant and Third-Time and Big Nose," said Moscow. "You know I didn't have a thing to do with Lucky Tom. You got no call for revenge."

"Who was it hit Lucky Tom?"

"How should I know?"

"Well," said Beyer, reasonably, "then how should I know who hit Dant and Third-Time and Big Nose?"

There was a long silent moment. "We've been friends a long time," Moscow said. "We have kept things cool, and we have all done very nicely that way—with no guns, and no blasting a bunch of guys out of revenge for something which we never did to Lucky Tom in the first place."

"If I thought you hit Lucky Tom—"

"The bum," said Moscow, "was not worth killing."

"If I thought you did it," Beyer went on, "I wouldn't go and shoot up a batch of punks like Dant and Third-Time and Big Nose. You know what I'd do?"

"What?"

"I'd go straight to the top," said Beyer. "I'd kill *you*, you bum!"

"That's no way to talk, Barry."

"You had no call to kill Lucky Tom. So maybe he was holding out a little in Ward Three, it don't make no difference."

"You had no call to kill those three boys."

"You don't know what killing is, bum."

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"Yeah?" Moscow challenged. "Yeah!"

That night, a gentleman named Mr. Roswell "Greasy" Spune turned his key in his ignition and was immediately blown from this world into the next. The little man with the small hands and the white gloves watched from a tavern across the street. Mr. Spune was a bagman for Barry Beyer's organization. Less than two hours after Mr. Spune's abrupt demise, six of Barry Beyer's boys hijacked an ambulance from the hospital garage. Five sat in back, and the sixth, garbed in white, drove the sporty vehicle through town with the pedal on the floor and the siren wide open. "This takes me back," one of them was heard to say. "This is the way it used to be before the world went soft in the belly. This is what you would call doing things with a little class."

The ambulance pulled up in front of a West Side tavern where the Moscow gang hung out. The ambulance tailgate burst open, and the five brave men and true emerged with submachine guns and commenced blasting away. Eight of Archie Moscow's staunchest associates died in the fray, and only one of the boys from the ambulance crew was killed in return.

Moscow retaliated the next day, shooting up two Beyer-operated card games, knocking off two small-time dope peddlers, and gunning down a Beyer lieutenant as he emerged from his bank at two-thirty in the afternoon. The gunman who accomplished this last feat then raced down an alleyway into the waiting arms of a rookie patrolman, who promptly shot him dead. The kid had been on the force only three months and was sure he would be up on departmental charges for forgetting to fire two warning shots into the air. Instead he got an on-the-spot promotion to detective junior grade.

By the second week of the war, the pace began to slow down. Pillars of both mobs were beginning to realize that a state of war demanded wartime security measures. One could not wander about without a second thought as in time of peace. One could not visit a meeting or a night club or a gaming house or a girlfriend without posting a guard, or even several guards. In short, one had to be very careful.

Even so, not everyone was careful enough. Muggsy Lopez turned up in the trunk of his car wearing a necktie of piano wire. Look-See Logan was found in his own kidney-shaped swimming pool with his hands and feet tied together and a few quarts of chlorinated water in his lungs. Benny Benedetto looked under the hood of his brand

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new car, found a bomb wired to the ignition, removed it gingerly and dismantled it efficiently, and climbed behind the steering wheel clucking his tongue at the perfidy of his fellowman. But he completely missed the bomb wired to the gas pedal. It didn't miss him; they picked him up with a mop.

The newspapers screamed. The city fathers screamed. The police commissioner screamed. Finney and Mattera worked double-duty and tried to explain to their wives that this was war. Their wives screamed.

It was war for three solid months. It blew hot and cold, and there would be rumors of high-level conferences, of face-to-face meets between Archer Moscow and Barry Beyer, cautious summit meetings held on neutral ground. Then, for a week, the killings would cease, and the word would go out that a truce had been called. Then someone would be gunned down or stabbed or blown to bits, and the war would start all over again.

At the end of the third month there was supposed to be another truce in progress, but by now no one was taking truce talk too seriously. There had not been a known homicide in five days. The count now stood at eighty-three dead, several more wounded, five in jail and two missing in action. The casualties were almost perfectly balanced between the two mobs. Forty of Beyer's men were dead, forty-three Moscow men were in their graves, and each gang had one man missing.

That night, as usual, Finney and Mattera prowled the uneasy streets in an unmarked squad car. Only this particular night was different. This night they caught the little man.

Mattera was the one who spotted him. He noticed someone sitting in a car on Pickering Road, with the lights out and the motor running. His first thought was that it was high school kids necking, but there was only one person there, and the person seemed to be doing something, so Mattera slowed to a stop and killed the lights.

The little man straightened up finally. He opened the car door, stepped out, and saw Finney and Mattera standing in front of him with drawn revolvers.

"Oh, my," said the little man.

Finney moved past him, checked the car. "Cute job," he said. "He's got this little gun lashed to the steering column, and there's a wire hooked around the trigger and connected to the gas pedal. You step on the gas and the gun goes off and gets you right in the chest. I read about a bit like that down in Texas. Very professional."

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Mattera looked at the little man and shook his head. "Professional," he said. "A little old guy with glasses. Who belongs to the car, friend?"

"Ears Carradine," said the little man.

"One of Moscow's boys," Finney said. "You work for Barry Beyer, friend?"

The little man's jaw dropped. "Oh, goodness, no," he said. His voice was high-pitched, reedy. "Oh, certainly not."

"Who do you work for?"

"Aberdeen Pharmaceutical Supply," the little man said. "I'm a research chemist."

"You're a *what*?"

The little man took off his gloves and wrung them sadly in his hands. "Oh, this won't do at all," he said unhappily. "I suppose I'll have to tell you everything now, won't I?"

Finney allowed that this sounded like a good idea. The little man suggested they sit in the squad car. They did, one on either side of him.

"My name is Edward Fitch," the little man said. "Of course there's no reason on earth why you should have heard of me, but you may recall my son. His name was Richard Fitch. I called him Dick, of course, because Rich Fitch would not have done at all. I'm sure you can appreciate that readily enough."

"Get to the point," Mattera said.

"Well," said Mr. Fitch, "is his name familiar?"

It wasn't.

"He killed himself in August," Mr. Fitch said. "Hanged himself, you may recall, with the cord from his electric razor. I gave him that razor, actually. A birthday present, oh, several years ago."

"Now I remember," Finney said.

"I didn't know at the time just why he had killed himself," Mr. Fitch went on. "It seemed an odd thing to do. And then I learned that he had lost an inordinate amount of money gambling—"

"Inordinate," Finney said, choked with admiration.

"Indeed," said Mr. Fitch. "As much as five thousand dollars, if I'm not mistaken. He didn't have the money. He was trying to raise it, but evidently the sum increased day by day. Interest, so to speak."

"So to speak," echoed Finney.

"He felt the situation was hopeless, which was inaccurate, but understandable in one so young, so he took his own life." Mr. Fitch paused significantly. "The man to whom he owed the money," he said, "and who was charging him appalling interest, and who had won the money in an unfair gambling match, was Thomas M. Carroll."

Finney's jaw dropped. Mattera said, "You mean Lucky Tom—"

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"Yes," said Mr. Fitch. For a moment he did not say anything more. Then, sheepishly, he raised his head and managed a tiny smile. "The more I learned about the man, the more I saw there were no legal means of bringing him to justice, and it became quite clear to me that I had to kill him. So I—"

"You killed Lucky Tom Carroll."

"Yes, I—"

"Six times. In the back of the head."

"I wanted to make it look like a professional killing," Mr. Fitch said. "I felt it wouldn't do to get caught."

"And then Beyer hit back the next night," Finney said, "and from there on it was war."

"Well, not exactly. There are some things a man must do," Mr. Fitch said. "They don't seem to fit into the law, I know. But—but they do seem right, you see. After I'd killed Mr. Carroll I realized everyone would assume it had been a revenge killing. A gangland slaying, the papers called it. I thought how very nice it would be if the two gangs really grew mad at one another. I couldn't kill them all myself, of course, but once things were set properly in motion—"

"You just went on killing," Mattera said.

"Like a one-man army," Finney said.

"Not exactly," said Mr. Fitch. "Of course I killed those three men on Cameron Street, and bombed that Mr. Spune's car, but then I just permitted nature to take its course. Now and then things would quiet down and I had to take an active hand, yet I didn't really do all that much of the killing."

"How much?"

Mr. Fitch sighed.

"How many did you kill, Mr. Fitch?"

"Fifteen. I don't really like killing, you know."

"If you liked it, you'd be pretty dangerous, Mr. Fitch. Fifteen?"

"Tonight would have been the sixteenth," Mr. Fitch said.

For a while no one said anything. Finney lit a cigarette, gave one to Mattera, and offered one to Mr. Fitch. Mr. Fitch explained that he didn't smoke. Finney started to say something and changed his mind.

Mattera said, "Not to be nasty, Mr. Fitch, but just what were you looking to accomplish?"

"I should think that's patently obvious," Mr. Fitch said gently. "I wanted to wipe out these criminal gangs, these mobs."

"Wipe them out," Finney said. "You know, let them kill each other off."

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"Kill each other off," he nodded.

"That's correct."

"And you thought that would work, Mr. Fitch?"

Mr. Fitch looked surprised. "But it *is* working, isn't it?"

"Uh—"

"I'm reminded of the anarchists around the turn of the century," said Mr. Fitch. "Of course they were an unpleasant sort of men, but they had an interesting theory. They felt that if enough kings were assassinated, sooner or later no one would care to be king."

"That's an interesting theory," Finney said.

"So they went about killing kings. There aren't many kings these days," Mr. Fitch said quietly. "When you think about it, there are rather few of them about. Oh, I'm certain there are other explanations, but still—"

"I guess it's something to think about," Mattera said.

"It is," said Finney. "Mr. Fitch, what happens when you run through all the gangsters in town?"

"I suppose I would go on to another town."

"Another town?"

"I seem to have a calling for this sort of work," Mr. Fitch said. "But that's all over now, isn't it? You've arrested me, and there will have to be a trial, of course. What do you suppose they'll do to me?"

"They ought to give you a medal," said Mattera.

"Or put up a statue of you in front of City Hall," said Finney.

"I'm serious—"

"So are we, Mr. Fitch."

They fell silent again. Mattera thought about all the criminals who had been immune three months ago and who were now dead, and how much nicer a place it was without them. Finney tried to figure out how many kings there were. Not many, he decided, and the ones that were left didn't really do anything.

"I suppose you'll want to take me to jail now," said Mr. Fitch.

Mattera cleared his throat. "I'd better explain something to you, Mr. Fitch," he said. "A police officer is a very busy man. He can't waste his time with a lot of kookie stories that he might hear. Finney and I, uh, have crooks to catch. Things like that."

"What Mattera means, Mr. Fitch, is a nice old guy like you ought to run home to bed. We enjoy talking to you, and I really admire the way you speak, but Mattera and I, we're busy, see. We've got an inordinate lot of crooks to catch . . ." There! " . . . and you ought to go on home, so to speak."

"Oh," said Mr. Fitch. "Oh. Oh, bless you!"

They watched him scurry away,

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and they smoked more cigarettes, and remained silent for a very long time. After a while Mattera said, "A job like this, you got to do something crazy once in a while."

"Sure."

"I never did anything this crazy before. You?"

"No."

"That nutty little guy. How long do you figure he'll get away with it?"

"Who knows?"

"Fifteen so far. Fifteen—"

"Uh-huh. And close to seventy others that they did themselves."

A light went on across the street. A door opened, and a man walked toward his car. The man had ears like an elephant. "Ears Carradine," Mattera said. "Better get him before he gets into the car."

"You tell him."

"Hell, you're closer."

Carradine stopped to light a cigarette. He shook out the match and flung it aside.

"I had him nailed to the wall on an aggravated assault thing a few years back," Finney said. "I had three witnesses that pinned him good—and not a breath of doubt."

"Witnesses."

"Two of them changed their minds and one disappeared. Never turned up."

"You better tell him," Mattera said.

"Funny the way that little guy had that car gimmicked. Read about it in the paper, you know, but I never saw anything like it before. Cute, though."

"He's getting in the car," Mattera said.

"You would wonder if a thing like that would work, wouldn't you?"

"You would at that. You should have told him, but it's that kind of a crazy night, isn't it?"

"He might see it himself."

"He might."

He didn't. They heard the ignition, and then the single shot, and Ears Carradine slumped over the wheel.

Mattera started up the squad car and pulled away from the curb. "How about that," he said. "It worked like a charm."

"Sixteen," said Finney.

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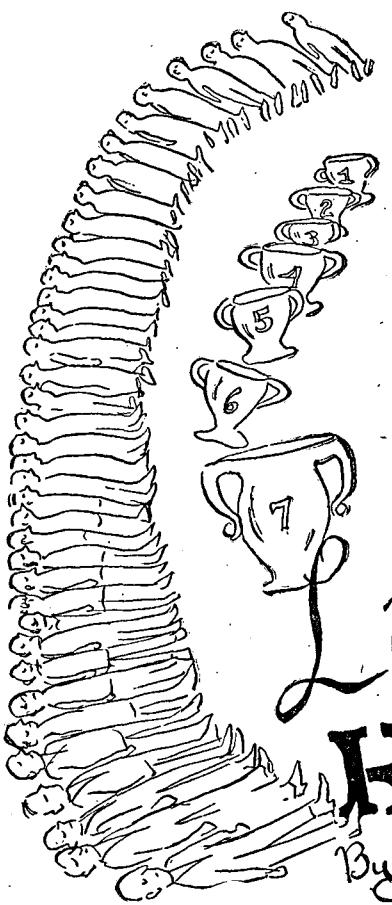
One of the great cynics of yesteryear reasoned that a man who indulges himself in murder is apt to progress to incivility and procrastination.



Lull in HOMICIDE

By James N. Semple

I was beginning to wonder if lunchtime was ever going to come. I must have looked at the big clock on the wall about ten times a minute. Even now, after working for what seemed like three days, it was only a little after eleven.

When the phone on my desk rang, I snatched it up.

"Homicide, Brentwood speaking," I said in a pleasant voice. You never could tell when the lieutenant might call. When I found out it was only the lab calling to give a report, I sighed. I grunted every so often to let him know I was still there. After writing down the information, I hung up and resumed my vigil.

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Things were amazingly slow here in homicide lately. Maybe it's just the Christmas spirit, I don't know. In the last two weeks we've only had one homicide, and Jackson was covering it. That left me to answer the phone and talk to anyone who might come in. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not bloodthirsty, especially two days before Christmas, but I was hoping for a little action.

It was getting very close to noon and my stomach had started growling, when he walked in. I silently cursed while I asked him to take a seat. He was a rather pleasant looking fellow, about forty-five, small, and with a constant smile on his face.

"Can I help you, sir?" I said smoothly.

"Uh, is this where you come to confess murder?"

I grabbed my note pad and assumed a more businesslike style. "Yes, sir, it is. Would you mind giving me your name."

"Not at all. James Thomas of 265 West Wentworth," he said, still smiling.

"Now, you would like to confess to a murder?"

"Well, not exactly," he said with an odd chuckle.

"Not exactly? But you said you did. Do you or don't you have a murder to admit to?"

He could tell I was irritated, and appeared to try and atone for it. "Actually, there's more than one," he said happily.

"More than one, eh?" This was getting promising, even if it was spoiling my lunch hour.

"Yes," he went on. "All told, there were thirty-nine."

"Heh-heh," was all I could manage. I grinned at him and started to say something, but stopped. "Are you kidding, sir?" I finally got out.

"Of course not," he said with a glare. "What do you think I am, a nut? I've got nothing better to do than run around confessing to thirty-nine murders?"

Good point, I thought. Of course I wasn't convinced. Four years on homicide, and I never ever had anyone confess to me. Now I get one confessing thirty-nine. Feast or famine, I guess. I tried to look professional and continued questioning him.

"Now about these, uh, thirty-nine murders. They all took place at the same time?"

He looked at me as if I were out of my mind. Finally he snapped at me, with a disgusted look on his face, "Really Detective Brentwood, who do you think I am, Ivan the Terrible? Of course not all at once."

"Oh, no. Of course I didn't really think. . . ."

"It took me nine years," he interrupted.

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"Nine years, huh? Excellent. That is, pretty fast. I mean. . . ."

"I know," he said calmly.

"They all took place inside the city limits, Mr. Thomas?"

"Certainly. They wouldn't count otherwise."

"Oh," was my response. "When did it start?"

"New Year's Day, 1957, was the first. The other thirty-eight have come right along."

"I'm sure they have," I said, feeling a little dizzy. I excused myself, went into the record room, and took a moment to clear my head before going over to the policeman at the desk. I asked him how many unsolved murders we had in the city since 1957. He looked annoyed but went over to a filing cabinet and pawed around for a while.

"Since January 1, 1957 there have been thirty-eight unsolved murders in the city. That includes one that happened on the first, too," he informed me.

I thanked him and returned to my desk.

I half expected Thomas to be gone when I got back, but he was calmly sitting there. When he saw me, he asked if it was customary to leave a murderer sitting alone like that. I didn't answer. Instead, I looked at him hard for a minute, and he started to squirm a little.

"Okay, Thomas, what's your game?" I finally said. "For your information, there have only been thirty-eight murders that are open since '57. What gives?"

"Oh, so that's where you were. Waste of time; it doesn't mean a thing."

"It doesn't?"

"Of course not. It's quite simple really. Not hard to figure out at all," he said with a pointed look at me. "While I killed thirty-nine people, only thirty-six murders went unsolved. You caught the "killer" three times. A shame that three men had to be executed for something they didn't do."

My eyes got big and my face got red. "You mean you killed thirty-nine people, but three of the cases were supposedly solved and three innocent men were put to death for them?"

"That's what I just told you, isn't it?" he said crossly. Then he brightened and said, "Actually that makes forty-two."

"Forty-two what?"

"Why, forty-two murders. In a way I'm responsible for the three innocent men dying, wouldn't you say?"

I ignored that question and asked one of my own. "But if you killed thirty-nine and three were solved, and thirty-eight are unsolved, that means two murders are unaccounted for."

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"Well really, detective, do I have to confess to everything? I'm sure I'm not the only murderer in the city."

"Oh," was my intelligent answer. "Then we still have two killers on the loose."

"Hmmph. If you weren't overly concerned with thirty-eight of them, why should two be so bothersome?"

I ran my hand through my hair and licked my lips. I was starting to get my control back. "Okay, Mr. Thomas, a few more questions before I book you. How can you prove you did it?"

"I have to prove it yet? Don't you do anything?" he grumbled. Then he began fishing in his coat pocket, and finally came up with a sheaf of soiled papers. "Here I have a complete list of all my victims, including minute details about the killings." He passed them across the desk, and I took a quick glance at them.

"Quite revealing, Mr. Thomas. Now, one more question. You said something before, about it not counting if they weren't done in the city limits? What did you mean?"

"Oh, that. It just meant that I had to kill them in my own territory or I wouldn't get points for it."

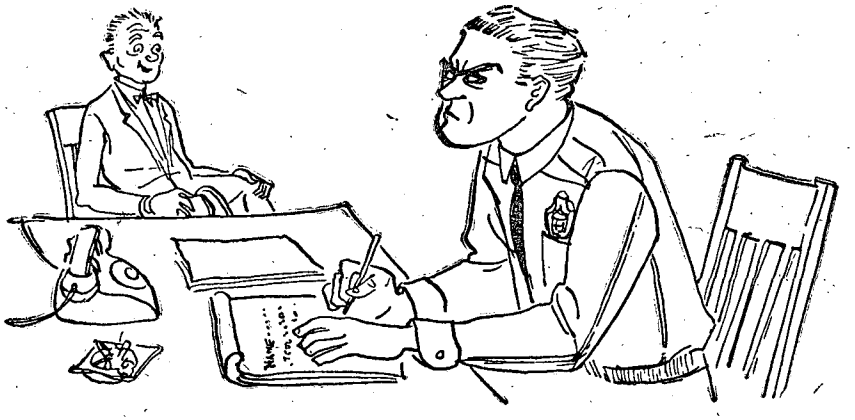
"Your own territory?" I said weakly.

"Yes. We each had a territory. We couldn't very well work in the same place, could we? Too much confusion."

"Oh, yes," I agreed. "No doubt."

"You see, the point of our game was to see who could get the most points. The most points in a year gave the person the title."

"You mean you had a champion-



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ship each year? A murder contest?"

"Oh, yes, much like the World Series. Without as much publicity, of course."

"Uh, could you briefly explain the game, sir?"

"I thought it was pretty obvious," he said with annoyance. "The two of us would try to kill as many people as we could during a year. Some people were worth more than others, of course. You, for instance, would be worth more than a factory worker, yet less than a teacher. At the end of the year, the one with the most points was declared the champion. I won it seven out of nine years."

I knew it was idiotic. I knew it couldn't be happening, yet I also knew he was telling the truth. "What about your partner, is he giving up too?"

"Heavens, no. That's why I'm here. He's dead. Made the mistake of trying to get an armed jewel salesman. You see, there is no more game."

"But why did you come here to confess?" I asked.

There were tears in his eyes as he answered. "There's nothing left for me anymore. What could I do that could equal the thrill, the challenge, and the anticipation of killing for competition?"

"You could do it yourself, couldn't you?"

"No, of course not. There would be no point to it. The spirit of competition wouldn't be there."

"Well, I don't see why you gave yourself up. Couldn't you have found someone else to play your game with you?"

"Hah!" he snorted bitterly. "How could I ask anyone? What do I say? Sir, would you care to try and kill more people than I can? No. He'd think I was crazy."

True, he would. I thought so, at first. I shifted my weight in the creaky old chair, and looked him straight in the eye. He didn't flinch.

"You say it's exciting and challenging, eh?"

"Like nothing else in the world," he said fervently.

I shifted again, and looked at him some more. I thought of how dull things had been until he walked in. I made up my mind, and leaned forward.

"Like a new partner, Thomas?" I asked softly.

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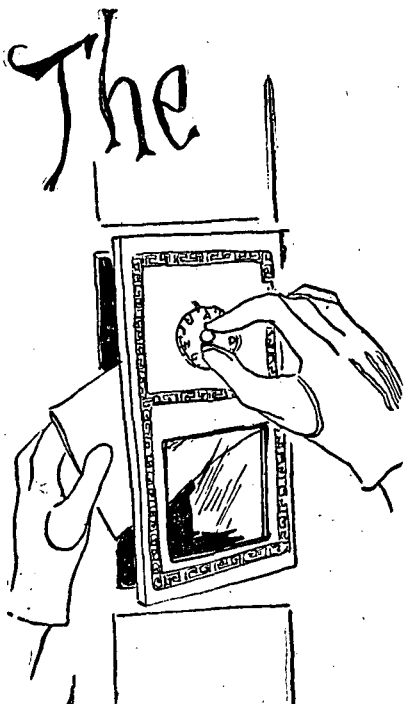
There are some who unconsciously "keep up apppearances," while others find it obligatory to work at it.



The ANNUITY

By Dan J. Marlowe

THEY were due to arrive at seven in the evening. Ten minutes before that, I went behind the faded hanging curtain that divided my efficiency apartment into sitting room and bedroom. Everything was in readiness on the boudoir table, including the cold stub of a smoked-down cigar and a folded hand towel near the row of opened bottles and jars. I looked into the closet to verify that the loud-checked sport jacket was readily at hand. I had rented this shabby efficiency because of its oversized closet, in which was an overhead shelf deep enough to contain my wig rack—and because it was all I could afford.

I ran a hand lingeringly down the row of evening gowns blending exotically in rainbow-hued soft materials, then returned to the other side of the curtain and sat down in the scuffed leather armchair to wait,

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the uncurtained sink and two-burner stove to my left.

When the knock came I opened the door, and in filed Big Hermie, Joey, and Cicero, in that order. Big Hermie's glance around my place was perfunctory; he and Joey had grown up in the same block with me—the two of them along with Manny Cosimano making my life a hell—and no one knew better than Big Hermie that I posed no threat to his boss, Cicero.

"Hiya, germ," Joey greeted me. He was lean and capable-looking, hard-faced, and whippet-like in his movements. He sounded more amiable than usual. "Ready?"

I nodded. There was only one lamp on in the room, and Cicero was looking at me curiously in the comparatively poor light; he'd seen me around for years, but he didn't know me the way the others did. He sat down in the armchair, and Big Hermie appropriated the only other chair, a straightbacked one. Cicero's bulk and that of Big Hermie in the already crowded room made the atmosphere seem oppressive. I could feel Cicero's disapproving gaze on my slight figure as I again passed through the hanging curtain.

"I don't like it, Joey," I could hear him complaining in a voice that was part rasp and part wheeze as I approached the boudoir table. "The little creep don't come within sixty-seventy pounds of Tony's weight."

"Wait," Joey said. He sounded confident.

I put on the wig of thick, oily hair in front of the mirror, eased in the cheek pouches that broadened my slender features, darkened my white skin with a grainy powder base, and swiftly worked in an olive-hued cream with my fingertips. Wiping my hands on the folded towel, I struck a match and lit the cigar stub, then walked to the closet to snatch the padded sport jacket from its hanger and slip into it. A hundred twenty seconds after passing through the curtain I went back and thrust my head and shoulders through its opening. "Snap it up, Cicero!" I growled from around the cigar in the corner of my mouth, imitating the heavy voice I had listened to over and over again on the tape recorder.

Cicero came halfway up out of the armchair before he caught himself. Big Hermie was on his feet, his small mouth a round O in his round face.

Joey slapped his thigh delightedly at their reaction. "Didn't I tell you?" he crowed. "The germ's the best quick change artist on the stem." He grinned at me. "Even if it don't keep him in coffee an' cakes."

Cicero recovered quickly. "How

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is he in the daylight?" he asked, his voice harsher than usual in his effort to disguise the shock I'd given him. When Tony Matteo said "Snap it up!" people snapped it up, and I had a feeling Cicero hadn't appreciated the reminder.

"Just as good," Joey said as proudly as if he were my trainer. "You ought to see him in the uniform. He's six inches shorter'n Tony, but I swear it'd take Tony's old lady to tell the difference."

"He knows what he has to do?"

"He knows," Joey confirmed.

Cicero silently removed a banded sheaf of bills from an inside breast pocket, riffled them to let me see the identical denominations, then handed the sheaf to Joey.

"For you, germ, when you bring it off," Joey explained to me, slapping the sheaf carelessly against his palm before putting it away out of sight in his topcoat. His glance took in the scurfy, soiled paper on the walls. "I guess you won't be sorry to be able to move out of this dump, huh?"

It was a rhetorical question requiring no answer. Cicero rose to leave, and Joey turned to open the door.

Big Hermie, who had re-seated himself, remained solidly in his chair. "Put a steak on for me," he demanded, looking from me toward the stove.

I glanced up appealingly at Joey.

"Come on, Hermie," Joey ordered. "I don't want him upset now."

The big man reluctantly heaved himself to his feet, and the three of them left. I extinguished the filthy cigar, flushed it down the toilet, and opened the window to try to air out the room. I slipped the bolt on the door as a precaution against Big Hermie's evading Joey's surveillance, then went back into the bedroom where I sat down again at the boudoir table, removed the makeup with cold cream and the towel, then slowly and carefully made myself up again. I did the eye shadow three times before I was satisfied with it. I went to the closet and selected a blue silk evening gown from the array, and a blonde bouffant wig from the rack. I teased the wig's back hair even higher before putting it on. Dressed, I slipped on three-inch high-heeled pumps, checked the ensemble in the closet-door pier glass, and returned to the sitting room.

I put Mozart's Symphony No. 29 in A on the hi-fi, the only decent piece of furniture I owned at the moment, although that condition wasn't going to last much longer. Mozart has so much more muscle than Debussy, and there are times when it's appropriate. I busied myself at the stove preparing a cheese

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souffle. It rose perfectly, a good omen. I had a glass of wine with my dinner, then watched television for an hour. One of the very first things I was going to do with Cicero's money—Tony Matteo's money, actually—was to get myself a color television set, after I found a decent apartment and furnished it myself, of course.

I turned off the set, had another glass of wine and a cigarette, removed the wig and returned it to the rack, undressed, and went to bed.

Tomorrow would be a busy day.

Joey drove me to the prison the following afternoon. I wore the prison uniform he'd brought me the week before, which I'd carefully padded to approximate Tony Matteo's substantial dimensions. Over my own dark trousers I had

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on the prison trousers, with the legs rolled up above the knees so they wouldn't show beneath the loose-fitting black overcoat—Tony's coat. In its pockets were the necessities to quick-change Tony to the facial appearance of the man I now resembled, Bill Newcomb, Tony's accountant. Bill was an easy type to do because with his toothbrush mustache and heavy, hornrimmed glasses he was almost a caricature.

The last thing I'd done before Joey's arrival was to apply a strip of white adhesive tape to the lobe of my left ear. A strip of tape like that both attracts and distracts the eye, leaving the remainder of the face less memorable. I had also made some preliminary disposition of material in the pockets of the dark trousers under the prison uniform which Joey knew nothing about.

On the way to the prison, I had Joey stop at a drugstore and pick up a five-pack of panatelas. He was nervous, although he tried not to show it; chattered incessantly, which wasn't like him. "—never have th' chance of a flea in a foundry of gettin' away with this if it was a federal can," he said as he drove, "but the dough that Tony's spread around inside this one gives it a chance. When you make it inside, just look for Manny an' let him take over. As a trusty, he'll have brought Tony to the visitors' room, an' he'll be waitin' to take him back to the cell. Manny won't let you go wrong inside."

I had heard it all before, but I didn't say anything. I knew that, barring the worst possible luck, it was going to be far easier than they had any idea. People see what they expect to see, and prison guards are people.

"You know that Manny's only three days away himself from hittin' the street on the completion of his assault rap," Joey went on, "but he'll have time to show you the ropes inside before then, an' you'll be able to manage until we spring you."

I smiled to myself. "There'll be no problem," I told him.

"There better not be," he said in a slip from his recent pals-together mien. Realizing it, he glanced over at me with an attempt at a jovial smile. "I mean, there's a lot ridin' on this."

Joey parked a block and a half from the prison entrance and I walked the rest of the way. I had made a dry run a week before in the same guise I wore now, both to learn the visitors' admittance routine and to observe firsthand the possible difficulties to be overcome. There weren't too many. It was a long step forward that half the guards were on Tony's payroll. The far-flung enterprise he ran from

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behind the prison walls, and the money he spread around lavishly, made it easy for him to point out that he needed more privacy than the main visiting room afforded to talk business with his lawyer and accountant. A smaller room diagonally across the corridor from the big cage had been made available to him, doubtless for a fee to someone. This almost insured the success of the program. The private visiting room wasn't the only prison concession to Tony Matteo's quasi-legal status in the outside world; the prison might not be a country club, but Tony's inconveniences were few. The only real reason for his present attempted flight from his two-to-five-year indeterminate sentence for bribery was to avoid a federal detainer, awaiting its completion; he had no intention of staying around to have that detainer served on him.

I went in through the visitors' gate, showed Bill Newcomb's credentials in the wallet pickpocketed by one of Joey's friends a month before, signed the visitors' book in an illegible scrawl, and followed the guard to the private visiting room set between two series of locked doors. The room was enclosed on three sides but open on the fourth or corridor side; open, that is, except for the bars. People passed along the corridor occasionally, but purposefully seldom glancing in. I drew the room's two chairs into position so that Tony's back would be to the corridor when he sat down.

I heard him before I saw him, his booming voice that always seemed to contain a trace of a snarl reverberating from the stone floors and walls. Manny Cosimano, so like Tony in appearance if not in cast-iron confidence, escorted him to the inside locked door. Manny, the swarthy, chunky, hardhanded monster who had broken my nose and my teeth and sent me into hock for a thousand dollars to repair my face while we were still in our teens, waited while the guard took over, passed Tony through, unlocked the door of the private visiting room, and let Tony in to join me.

For the guard's benefit, Tony started in on me immediately with a stream of characteristic vituperation, denouncing me for a supposed business transgression. The instant the guard clanged the door shut and walked away, I began transforming my features from those of Bill Newcomb to those of Tony Matteo. Tony sat and watched me, unblinking. His bulk partially shielded me from the corridor as I worked, and he kept up a steady monologue in his heavy voice while I removed Newcomb's black fedora and slipped on the Matteo wig. I

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pointed at Tony's trouser legs; he nodded and rolled them up, disclosing dark trousers beneath, while I rolled mine down, covering my own dark trousers with the legs of the prison trousers.

I removed the rest of the makeup material from the pockets of Tony's overcoat, and motioned him to stand up. This was the only really ticklish moment, the transferral of the coat. For an instant, *two* men in prison uniform would be standing in the visiting room. I waited for a moment when there was no sound of passing feet in the corridor outside, then shucked out of the coat. Tony dived into it, then sat down with his back to the corridor again, and we had it made. Now, even before I had him made up as Newcomb, I was Matteo to an official eye that would see what it expected to see, and Tony was the visiting accountant.

I went to work powdering Tony's dark skin and transferring to him Newcomb's toothbrush mustache, hornrimmed glasses, and black fedora. When I was satisfied with his looks, I handed him the makeup materials and he stowed them away in the pockets of the coat again, to be carried out with him. I ripped the strip of adhesive from my ear lobe and transferred it to his, then held a finger to my lips to indicate to him that he could stop the monologue on which he'd never missed a beat. I picked it up in his voice, bouncing my facsimile of his harsh growl off the walls. For the first time since he'd entered the visitors' room his expression changed; he looked startled. I raised my voice, shouting at him, then walked to the bars and rattled them loudly. "Get this creep out of here!" I roared at the guard when he arrived, flustered at the short visit. "He can't do nothin' right!"

The guard hurriedly unlocked the door. Swathed in the coat and with his head at an angle, Tony stepped out into the corridor. I listened to their retreating footsteps as the guard led the way to the outer locked door. Tony knew what he had to do; sign the book in an illegible scrawl, and walk a block and a half to Joey in the waiting car.

When the guard came back for me, I was muttering to myself. "Stupid jerk!" I exploded aloud as he unlocked the door again. "No, not you—him! Although you're no prize yourself. Here!" I thrust the five-pack of cigars at him. The guard laughed as he accepted them, ran the cellophaned packet under his nose, then stuffed it inside his uniform as he led the way to the inner locked door. I wanted him doing something besides looking at me.

When the steel door clanged shut behind me, Manny Cosimano

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stepped forward from a lounging position against the wall. I couldn't fathom his expression until he took my arm and squeezed it, feeling for the padding underneath. The make-up was so good he hadn't been sure the switch had worked. "What th' hell's the matter wit' ya?" I blared at him in Tony's voice, and he skipped sideways in renewed shock. "Go get me some aspirin or somethin', y'hear? That creep gave me a headache. I'm gonna lay down a while."

Recovering, Manny steered me deftly along brightly lighted corridors past long rows of cell blocks. "Don't do nothin' wit'out I'm wit' you," he said from the corner of his mouth as he stopped in front of a larger-than-average cell. "Get down on the cot an' play sick." His coarse, heavy features gave him an even more jackal-like appearance than I remembered.

I entered the cell, sat down on the cot, and looked around me. Tony's cell had better appointments than my efficiency apartment. I sat for a moment listening to the prison noises. When I was sure Manny was gone, I unbuckled my belt, stripped off prison trousers and underneath dark trousers together, separated them quickly, and donned the prison trousers again. I removed the special material from the pockets of the dark trousers and stowed it in Tony's chest of drawers alongside one of his trimly folded tailor-made prison uniforms. I balled up the dark trousers and tucked them into a corner. Manny would dispose of them the next day.

Mentally at ease for the first time in hours, I stretched out on the cot and folded my hands behind my head. Only one act remained to be played in the drama; no, two, counting the release. I had only one worry, actually; that Manny might delegate his part of the performance still to come, but I didn't really think so. Manny didn't like me, as he had proved long ago, and I was sure he wouldn't miss his present opportunity.

No, I really had nothing to worry about.

I played sick for two days, not sick enough to go to the infirmary, but sick enough to stay out of the carpenter shop where Tony worked. His strength and his aptitude with tools was something I couldn't simulate, so the apparent malaise was a necessity. Manny hovered near the cell, fending off would-be sympathizers, while I subjected him in Tony Matteo's voice to high-decibel upbraidings for fancied shortcomings. The performance was all the easier to sustain in that Tony had few contacts with the run-of-the-mill prisoners anyway, and Manny wasn't

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popular with them. I left the cell only to go to meals in the cafeteria, and Manny was at my side every moment of such trips. I had him draw me a map of the prison layout, and I asked him where his own cell was. He was surprised at the question, but on a trip back from the cafeteria he detoured to show me. I memorized the route.

When Joey first had approached me with the proposition, I knew at once they never intended to get me out. They couldn't expect me to keep up the masquerade indefinitely, either, so it had to be they intended to kill me. For days after I'd said yes to Joey—a man like me doesn't say no to a man like him—I picked it apart in my mind. If they were going to kill me, the pivotal point became Manny's release date on the third day after the switch. It would make sense to the boys to have him eliminate me before he was released, but how could a dead me be expected to pass as Tony once the prison undertaker removed the padded uniform?

It came to me gradually that their plan was more subtle than that: Manny would kill me, strip the body, destroy my identity, including my face—I'd never been in trouble with the law, so fingerpints weren't a problem—and leave the prison authorities with a king-sized twin headache, the disappearance of Tony Matteo into thin air, plus the sudden acquisition of a dead prisoner of whom there was no record. They'd play hell making two and two out of that set of conditions.

Once I'd figured it, only a slight amendment was necessary. The critical point was obviously to be the morning of the third day—Manny couldn't risk knocking me off too soon—since his release was to occur at eleven in the morning. The time for him to make his move was when we were together after breakfast, so before our walk to the cafeteria I loaded my pockets with the tubes of makeup material I'd smuggled inside in the trousers under the prison uniform. Under my shirt I stuffed one of Tony's folded prison uniforms, and under my shirt went a six-inch, double-edged stiletto I removed from the chest of drawers and unwrapped from its swaddling handkerchief. When Manny arrived, I was as ready as I could be.

As I expected, he spoke up when we left the cafeteria. I hadn't been able to eat any breakfast. "I'll show you the carpenter shop this mornin'," Manny said. "You know I'm makin' it out of here today, so you got to know your way around till the boys spring you. There'll be nobody there now, so it's a good time. You better report once an'

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whack a finger wit' a hammer or somethin', an' by the time you're ready to go back the boys'll have you out of here accordin' to plan."

"Sure, Manny," I said.

The carpenter shop was in the maintenance building, two buildings away from the main cell block, beyond the boiler room with its heating plant. Manny led the way through the long corridors, a half stride in advance of me. I watched carefully where he kept his keys, and how he used them on the doors we passed through. Our footsteps echoed eerily in the early morning silence. The clanking and banging in the boiler room made me nervous; I was watching Manny as closely as I could without seeming to. The boiler room seemed as good a setting as any for Manny's little act. I unbuttoned my shirt and gripped the handle of the stiletto, but he led the way through another door and into the carpenter shop beyond.

"Here's where you hang out," he said, opening a door covered with a sheet of tin. The odor of paint assailed my nostrils as I followed him inside. It was a paint-spray room, with tin on all four walls, and tables and chairs drying on racks. It was also a tiny cul-de-sac, and my stomach lurched as Manny whirled on me, knife in hand.

"Now, you little wart!" he said viciously.

If I had been five percent less ready, he would have had me. Terrified as I was, I managed to jerk the stiletto from beneath my shirt and jam four and a half inches of it into his chest as he closed with me. His coughing grunt echoed in my ears as he was sinking to the paint-roughened floor. In a panic lest he get up, I bent quickly and used the stiletto twice more where I judged his heart was.

I listened then, but there wasn't a sound from anywhere in the building. When I was sure he was dead, I stripped him of his uniform and got him into the one of Tony's I'd brought under my shirt. He was unbelievably heavy, but I managed it. Breathing heavily, I steeled myself for what came next. I wrenched a board from a frame on which a paint-sprayed table was drying, and with the board I obliterated Manny's features. Just enough ooze trickled down onto Tony's uniform to make the job artistic. When I had finished, to all intents and purposes a pulverized-faced Tony Matteo was stretched out on the paint room floor.

Listening for footsteps, although we were still thirty minutes away from the morning work buzzer, I took off Tony's padded uniform that I'd been wearing and put on Manny's. It was too large, but I tucked it in as best I could. Then,

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working feverishly, I made up my face to resemble Manny's. It didn't require too much, basically a coarsening of Tony's features, since Tony and Manny were the same type. I took Manny's keys, then dragged the body into a corner and stood a paint frame in front of it, bundled up the makeup materials in Tony's discarded padded uniform, and shoved it under my arm.

I retraced the route Manny and I had taken there, looking neither to right nor left. Passing through the boiler room again, I tossed the wrapped bundle up onto the top of one of the twelve-foot-high furnaces. Letting myself back in through the final door to the main cell block with Manny's keys, I went directly to his cell. My nerves were tighter than E-strings, but no one looked at me twice.

The next two hours were the longest of my life. On the bed in Manny's cell was a box, the personal belongings he'd been going to take with him. To give myself something to do and also to give the appearance of being busy, I opened it and repacked it several times, fussing with it as though I couldn't get it to my satisfaction. It was even worse after the work buzzer sounded and the shuffle of moving feet died out. I was left alone with my thoughts in the cell block quiet, as Manny on this morning would be expected to remain in his cell until summoned for his release.

The summons came at ten-thirty, and the necessity for action spurted the flow of my adrenalin. The whole procedure went like clockwork. There were two other prisoners going out too, and they divided the attention of the guard and the clothing clerk. I asked for suit and coat sizes a size smaller than Manny would have needed; I didn't dare ask for less in case they had a record to check against, although it didn't seem likely. In the dressing room, I had to do some skillful folding and tucking to make the misfit less obvious. I stepped up to the guard's desk behind the other prisoners, signed the ledger, and received Manny's wristwatch and wallet and bus ticket to town. The bored guard contented himself with making wisecracks about where we'd be spending the evening.

The three of us were marched through the iron gate in the forty foot wall and put in the prison stationwagon for the short ride to the bus terminal. Once on the bus, one of the other prisoners attempted to start a conversation with me, but I stared right through him. He shrugged and let it drop. I stayed on the bus all the way downtown, watching while the other two got off at intermediate stops enroute.

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I went directly to my place, packed my wigs and makeup material, left all the clothing and shoes; I'd have better shortly; then checked my suitcases at a locker in the railroad station. I hadn't much money and I'd have a thin time for a bit until I opened up the lines of communication, but it would be worth it. I'd wait until Tony decided whether he wanted to be declared dead or not. It didn't matter to me that I'd given him an option he never expected to have, although naturally it mattered to him.

The reason I don't care is because I'm all set now. I've decided to ask Tony for a thousand a month. I can live handsomely on a thousand, the way I've always dreamed of living, and as far as Tony is concerned it will be only one more business expense, one more cost of doing business at the same old stand. Tony can pay a thousand a month out of his change pocket and never miss it.

His first reaction will be to get rid of me to make sure my mouth stays shut, of course, but he'll find he can't do that. When he has time to think it over, I'm sure he'll pay. For one thing, after what happened to Manny, I believe Tony will think twice about having a man-of-a-thousand-faces angry with him and likely to pop up anywhere. No, Tony will pay.

The mechanics of getting the money, while seeing to it that Tony's boys can't get at me, will be simplicity itself. I'll dress as a woman and rent a post office box in a woman's name, then instruct Tony to send the thousand to the post office box. A different girl each month will make the pickup. So I have no worries now.

I always knew I'd somehow turn the tables on the crowd that deviled me since grammar school, and I find it especially pleasant that my coming affluence is at least partly due to Manny Cosimano, who hated me and hurt me because I wasn't the clod that he was.

All the hectoring indignities and beatings are a thing of the past now.

None of the gang will ever set eyes on the man they knew.

They'll never find me again.

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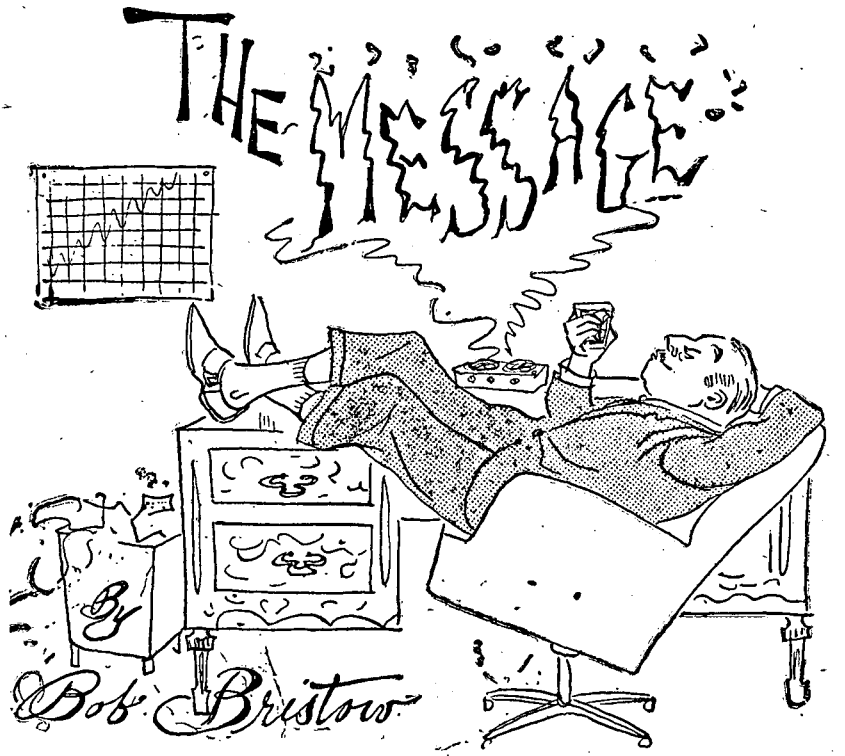
When one "almost" succeeds, he fails, but the penalty is contingent upon the attempted objective.

HERBERT T. HARKNESS sat in his luxuriously paneled office observing the splendid curves of his secretary as he reluctantly finished with the dictating for the afternoon. "I'm afraid I've kept you late," he said, half apologizing for this in such a manner as not to be apologizing at all.

She uncrossed her legs and smiled, slightly strained perhaps, but still disguising her basic contempt. "That's all right, Mr. Harkness," she said as she straightened her skirt.



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"But if you're finished now, I must be getting home to my husband."

Herbert let his forefinger play with the neatly trimmed mustache that accented the line of his lip. "Very well," he said, "but before you leave, you might fix me a drink, if you don't mind."

"Yes, sir," she said.

He liked that. He liked the idea of keeping her from her husband a little while longer. She hadn't missed him with that remark when she'd seen him studying her. Well, the young buck could wait. He'd have his drink first.

Yvonne brought him the drink, then went into the outer office. In a moment she reappeared with a package. "A messenger left this for you," she said.

He glanced at the small box. "What is it?" he asked, sipping the drink.

"I don't know, Mr. Harkness."

"Well, open it for me before you leave, please."

"Of course."

He drank from the glass and pretended to examine some papers on his desk.

"It's a small tape recorder. There seems to be a tape threaded and a note addressed to you. It says, *With my best wishes, Charlie Ewell.*"

He turned his head curiously at the name. Charlie Ewell . . . He'd started out with Charlie years ago. In fact, it had been Charlie's idea for the computer design that had given him his initial boost toward success, but he had gotten rid of Charlie, who didn't have the first bit of sense about developing the idea. Conceiving the idea, yes, but developing . . .

Charlie would have been an albatross around his neck, so he got Charlie a little swacked one night and, well, the papers he signed paid him off—a few thousand dollars for his idea.

Admittedly a bad play, but Charlie had no sense about money. As a matter of fact, he hadn't seemed too displeased. He'd gone off with some woman to Mexico and had quite a time with the money.

Herbert had no idea what had happened to Charlie, but he had nothing to worry about. He'd made it big with the computer and he'd bought the new talent he'd needed. Organization was the key, and he had that. Brilliant technical minds were a dime a dozen.

"May I go now, Mr. Harkness?"

He smiled innocently. "Certainly. Thank you."

After she had gone he ignored the small tape recorder on his desk for twenty minutes. Well, he hadn't really ignored it, but tried to. As often as he looked away from the spool of tape, he returned to it, wondering what in the devil Charlie

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Ewell would be sending him the machine for anyway . . . and what was on the tape.

In between glances he imagined Ewell making some kind of grandstand play for more money, but that was ridiculous because even Charlie Ewell would have to know that the papers he had signed cut him out cleanly, neatly, and very, very legally.

Or—he considered this possibility—Charlie might finally have figured out that he'd been something of a dope, and this message might contain some sort of threat. But the more Herbert pondered that, the less sensible it appeared, because the tape would be evidence, Charlie's voice and all, and even Charlie had more sense than to . . .

But then perhaps it wasn't Charlie at all. It was *from* Charlie, yet he didn't know that it actually *was* Charlie.

Herbert got up to refill his drink. What was it Yvonne had said? The machine had been delivered by a messenger. Charlie probably thought he'd have refused to see him if he'd come in person. He asked himself, tentatively, if he would see Charlie Ewell, and knew he would refuse. He would have Yvonne tell him he was out. Yes, he didn't want to see Charlie, and Charlie apparently knew it, but wanted to send him this message—about *what?* A pitch for charity?

Herbert stirred his drink and returned to his desk. He studied the small battery-operated machine, expensive, and the spool with perhaps ten or fifteen minutes of tape, if it was all used. He drew the machine toward him, lifted it, a smooth plastic model manufactured by a well-known company.

"All right, Charlie, it's a clever idea. Let's hear what it is you have to say to me."

He flicked the switch and turned up the volume, leaned back lazily in his swivel chair and propped his feet up on the desk beside the machine.

The tape turned a few revolutions until, about the time Herbert assumed something was wrong, he heard Charlie's voice flow clearly and smoothly, as a matter of fact, quite pleasantly, from the speaker.

"How are you, Herb, you old scoundrel you? I'll bet you've gotten fat now that you've made it so great. Listen, Herb, I've got a terrific new idea, absolutely fantastic, which I think will just explode the industry; and when I give it to you, I want to work out some kind of a deal like we had last time, which was fine, in case you've ever wondered. I had one hell of a time while it lasted. I'm that kind of guy, I guess, and I'd like to work out something like that again. One

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big shot for me, and then you can develop it into whatever comes with it, boom it big, the way you can do things. That's one thing about you, Herb. You have the skill at promoting, seeing the potential and then blowing it up into something really great, like the first idea for the computer."

Well, it was nice to discover that Charlie wasn't going into something boorish about the computer. In fact, it was pleasant to know that he was satisfied. In a way it wasn't too surprising. That was Charlie . . .

"Before I go into this new idea for you, I want to tell you what's been going on with me the last several years. First of all, you remember when you paid me the $25,000? I took off. I had been going with this girl, you remember, who worked in the factory with me, a nice kid, little Irish girl, plump, a real little beauty. When I got the money I went to her place and we threw one tremendous celebration. By the time we got sober, I realized I was pretty crazy about this kid, so I told her to quit her job, and what we ought to do is leave New York and go to Mexico, which is what we did. We flew down there, and I guess we used our heads a little because we avoided the expensive places and made out very well with the money. You can cover an awful lot of ground with $25,000 in Mexico if you're careful. You've missed that. It's too bad you won't cut loose and have a fling, Herb. It'd be good for you."

If I cut loose and had a fling, I'd be broke just about like you are now. Instead of sticking to it and using people and money to advantage, I could be broke and hungry someplace. Thanks, Charlie, for the advice.

"After a time, though, the money started to run low. You can cover a lot of ground but you can't go on forever. That's about the time Letta began to show signs of fatigue. We thought she'd just been partying too much, so we settled down and took it easy for a while, but that didn't help. Finally I took her to a doctor and he examined her carefully and ran a number of tests. It was pretty terrible, Herb. She was suffering from leukemia, and the doctor said maybe five years, if it didn't move too fast and if we got her the transfusions from time to time. That meant there had to be quite a bit of care, which meant money, especially when it came to the transfusions and the medical care. So I wrote you a letter, because by then we were just about broke, to tell you the truth. I don't know what happened, but about two months went by and we didn't get an answer, and I figured maybe the crazy Mexican mail had something to do with it, so I wrote

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another letter. After another couple of months I guessed you'd grown so big that you'd told some clerk to screen out all the mail asking for money, and that's just what this letter was. I didn't have any right to do it, I realize that, but with Letta sick and growing weaker, I thought I'd swallow my pride and hit you for a few thousand dollars. Anyway, the best I've been able to figure is that some clerk was killing off my letters before you ever got to see them."

Right, Charlie, at least the first few letters. Finally, they did show me a later one you'd sent that sounded pretty desperate. They showed it because it was particularly distressing. I read it, Charlie, and if I've ever heard a freeloader bawling for a handout, that was it. All that concocted story about Letta suffering . . . You were out there with a hangover, not wanting the party to end, and figured old Herb would stake you for another year or two. Well, not so, baby. You made your deal with me and that's the end of it. That's why you didn't get any answer, Charlie.

"Finally I decided you must not be seeing the letters, so I gave up on that. By then we were terribly broke, and being broke in Mexico is about the most miserable thing in the world. No kidding, Herb, those people put up with us when we've got the cash, but when that runs out . . . well, you're through.

"Honestly, we got so broke I couldn't even get us out of Mexico, so I made my way to Mexico City, located a chemical industry and looked it over, and right away I saw how they were wasting a lot of time and energy. I made a deal with the production manager that for all the money I saved them, he'd give me a cut. This worked out all right for about two years, but the longer I stayed the more modern the operation became, and I suppose you'd say I phased myself out because toward the last I wasn't drawing very much. I had managed to keep Letta hospitalized though, and every once in a while we had money enough to take a short trip to the coast. For a time, until she suffered a spell, it was like it used to be.

"I had to leave the factory, but by that time I'd mastered the language pretty well. You'll never believe what I did then. I got a job with the Mexican government translating technical articles about industry, these being sent on to Mexican scientists and industrialists. I could do that because I understood the science part of it, which helped in the translation. It didn't pay very much, but it was a living. The trouble was, Letta began to fail badly those last two years. Then I remembered an article I'd read and translated about . . . well, your

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computer, and about how you'd made a fantastic amount of money since the beginning, about the time you bought me out."

Here it comes . . . He's going to get bitter. He's going to ask for the handout yet. The fool. The perfect fool. But, no, he said he'd come up with a new idea, a big one. He's probably got to blow off a little bitterness. That must be it.

"That's the only time I ever really felt sorry for myself. I wished I'd held out and stayed with you because part of all that money would be mine. But that kind of thinking is hindsight and, back then, twenty-five thousand was a lot of money and I didn't honestly know how good I was anyway. I have to admit I hated you a little bit, or at least hated your success when things were so rough for Letta.

"I don't know how to finish this part because it's very sad to me, but I suppose it means nothing to anybody else. The last six months—Letta didn't make five years; she just got four—the last six months were very hard on me. I couldn't afford the medical care she needed, and sometimes she'd lie there so weak I'd wrack my brain trying to figure out how I could manage to get more money, but by then I was about broken by the strain. So it narrowed, and toward the last I just held her and remembered how good it once was, how we used to get high on wine and make love and be happy, and how I used to drink when I was with you, how I got high that night and signed the papers. What a night that was! Then, mercifully, it ended for her. I held her in my arms and she drifted off like she was falling asleep; I held her for a long time before I realized she was gone, and then I rocked

her and wept alone until morning.

"Well, I suppose you didn't need to hear that, but I needed to make you understand what it was like, those four years. I buried her there and drifted back to the States, and my mind was restless. I thought about you a lot, and I thought if I had some kind of an idea, and if I could get it to you, maybe we could do some more business. So that's what this is all about."

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Well, finally, Charlie . . . I was afraid you were going to drown in your own tears. Now, what has this capable mind of yours come up with?

"One night I was sitting there thinking, and it came to me. It looked to me like we were going to have small wars around the world for a long time, and one smart direction to go might involve munitions, so I got a job in a small munitions factory on the West Coast to find out all about the new plastic explosives. Now that's quite a field, Herb. It's something that could really be big, but a guy has to come up with a new idea. That's what I did.

"The world is full of guerrilla warfare, and now that they are using plastics, small amounts capable of blowing up large installations, all a guy needs to do is come up with a new device. I started studying detonation, and learned all about delayed-action fuses, which in a guerrilla operation is particularly desirable. From there it was very simple. With a small amount of explosive and an idea for a delayed-action timing device for detonation, I knew I had something special.

"Now here's the proposition, Herb: you get an ordinary container, one that wouldn't be suspected, and you load and set it with a timing device so that when it's turned on about five or ten minutes or so elapse before it explodes."

Who wants a device that can . . . Charlie, I'm afraid you missed it this time. A little too much Mexican booze on the brain.

"Say, something unobtrusive, Herb, that will also be destroyed by the explosion and thereby eliminate all evidence, like—well, Herb, like a tape recorder that activates the timer when it's turned on."

Herbert finished his drink.

"So long, Herb . . . This is for Letta."

Suddenly Herbert T. Harkness jerked his feet off the desk and leaped toward the machine. As he reached it, the last of the tape disappeared and began to flap. Grabbing the tape recorder savagely, he turned to hurl it through the window.

Herbert T. Harkness almost made it.

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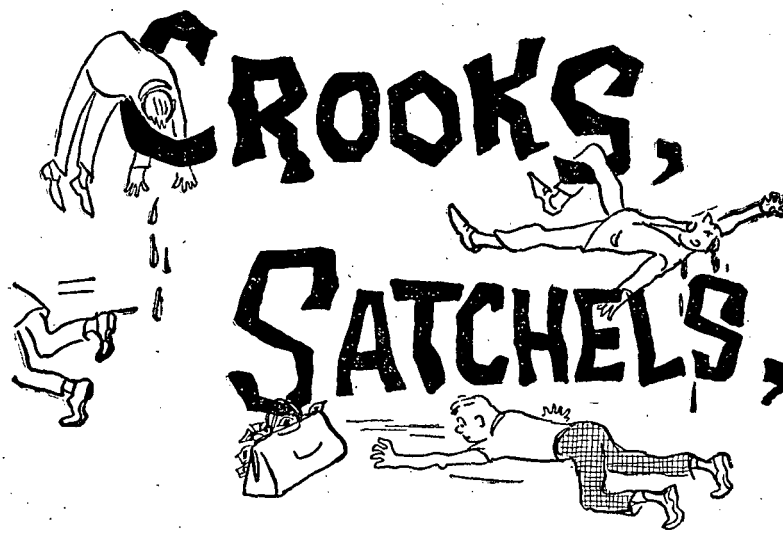
The man who seeds for a bountiful harvest often overlooks the happenstance of frost.



I'M sitting in my room minding my own business which ain't very hard, because right now I'm kind of like unemployed. But like my educated friend, Hot Rod Washburne says, "This ain't the worst thing in the world because there's people out of work all the time." Hot Rod says that sometimes big executives drawing down twenty and twenty-five gees are sometimes out of work for five-six months before they find a position. So why should I worry? Sooner or later something's got to turn up. Anyway, that's what Hot Rod says and I listen when he says something, because he's a pretty smart guy. He's thirty-eight years old and I ain't never seen him work a day in his life.

And that ain't easy, no matter what anybody tells you. You can beat working if you're born with a

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silver spoon, but from what I hear, more people are born without spoons than with them. I think Lincoln said something about that, too.

So why worry, I keep telling myself. All it gets you is a lot of grey hairs and I don't need that. I'm a good-looking guy, young, very smart and also a clean-cut type. So in a way it doesn't make sense that I'm not working. Maybe the real reason is because I don't have an honorable discharge from the Navy. It's not exactly a dishonorable discharge. It's one of those new secret classifications, which says that the United States Navy and me haven't parted company on the best of terms.

Like they say, there's a girl at the root of my troubles, and in my case it's Selma Litts, who's a Wave. I remember it like it happened yesterday.

I first met Selma when we were stationed in Florida. I took one look at this big blonde chick and I knew that we were made for each other.

She feels the same way, because when I kiss her she trembles and that's a sure sign that she's crazy for me. We're two splendid specimens. I'm handsome and smart and she's gorgeous, fills her uniform nicely, and we have this large animal magnetism going for us.

I got it bad, and I find that after two dates she's shaking and trembling even worse than before. I find it very rough to stay in my barracks at night when she's over in the Waves' barracks, so I sneak out one night and I get by the Marine sentry stationed outside of her place. I meet her in the washroom at three o'clock in the morning and we start hugging and kissing. An hour later I sneak back to my barracks like a common criminal, but it was worth it. She was trembling so good she

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had me trembling right with her.

But when I get back to my barracks I've got trouble. It's my luck that the chief petty officer decides to pull a bed check. Naturally he doesn't find me sacked out, because I'm not there. I get ten hours extra duty for that, but what with Selma's trembling and all that, I figure it's worth it.

I'm back over to the Waves' barracks the next night and things are getting real rough for Selma and me. She's shaking and I'm shaking and things can't go on like that. I already know that I love her, so I ask her to marry me.

You've got to see Selma to understand. All a guy has to do is take one look and he falls in love with Selma Litts right away. Well, I figure with all the trembling and quivering, that she's going to grab my offer.

She puts her hands on my shoulders and says, "Harold, how long have you been in the Navy?"

"Almost six years," I answer quickly, because I've got a good sense of time.

"Harold, you're still a seaman. How can I marry a man I outrank?"

"But those things happen," I explain. "I was a first class aviation machinist . . ."

"Never mind what you were. I heard about how you were running a still on Johnston Island, and how you were broken down to seaman first. The whole base knows about your record. Before I marry a man he's got to be as solid as a rock. I want a house and kids, and money to start marriage with."

"How much do you want?" I ask. "Ten thousand be enough for you? I can start up a little operation right here on the base and I'll have that for you in no time."

"There you go again, trying for shortcuts. In the first place, I want more than ten thousand. It used to be ten thousand, but prices are up, real estate is sky high. It'll have to be fifteen thousand dollars. My hitch will be up soon, and if we have fifteen thousand we can get married."

So that was how things stood then in the Waves' washroom, with me holding her, and her shaking and telling me, "Stop, Harold. You don't have any right."

That's what she thought. I was going to marry her, and I figured that gave me certain rights.

Anyway, I hear somebody coming into the barracks and when I stick my head out of the washroom I see two Wave officers. And just about then I learn how sneaky the Navy really is. Sending Wave officers around to pull a bed check on the enlisted Waves! That's about as underhanded as anybody can get. I can understand the Navy check-

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ing on the guys. But the Waves? That's going too far. It's an invasion of privacy, is what it is.

I'm no fool though. I already told you that I was smart. The minute I see them, I make a mad dash to one of the empty bunks, jump in and pull the blanket over my head.

Selma stays right where she is, in the washroom. Why not? She's got a perfect right to be there.

But talk about those Navy Wave officers. Not only did they pull a bed check, but they count Selma too. That's like hitting below the belt. There are supposed to be twenty-four sleeping Waves in the barracks. They get twenty-five as a final figure, and in a Wave barracks having one more is worse than having one less.

Right away one of those officers starts blowing her whistle. It sounded like Battle Stations, Hit the Deck, the Enemy is in Sight, and all that kind of stuff.

Waves start rolling out of their sacks and snapping to attention, but I stayed under the blanket like I was frozen, until one of the officers pulls the blanket off me. I didn't even bother to salute, but was off and running like I was in the second at Hialeah and I had a fast start.

I heard lots of screaming in back of me and somebody was yelling, "Halt! Halt!"

But I paid no attention. The way it figured was that I'd run right over the parade grounds to my barracks, but I'd be traveling so fast nobody would be able to see me. All they'd see would be a shadowy form whizzing through the dark.

I flew through the door and there's the Marine sentry. He ain't big, but he's carrying a World War Two Garand pointing right at my belt. When he said, "Halt!" he was thirty-two feet, five inches tall. And I halted. Make no mistake about that.

I hit the brakes and skidded right up to him. I laughed and put my hands over my head and said, "Kamarad! Give me a break, will ya, buddy?"

I never did get to find out if he would, because just then the Wave officers come running out and also some of the girls in their nighties. The Marine sees all these kids running around in their underwear and it musta upset him, because he pulls the trigger and a slug zips by my right ear and buries itself in the barracks.

Right away there's real excitement. Three Waves faint. Searchlights start going on all over the base. It always happens when there's any kind of trouble at the Waves' barracks. In fact, I think the Admiral has got a direct wire to any

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trouble over there. Usually if there's any trouble at the enlisted man's barracks, the O.D. handles it. He drives out in his Jeep with a couple other guys, like civilized human beings, but that doesn't apply when there's trouble at the Waves' barracks. All of a sudden six Jeeps come careening up and there's brass all over the place.

I don't need anyone to tell me that I've got big trouble.

There's a court martial and it takes five pages just to read off all the charges. They say I was A.W.O.L., discovered in the Waves' barracks, out of bounds, and I fled the scene of the crime, whatever it is. I get myself a Marine lawyer, and he tells me that the brass is willing to make a deal.

All I have to do is give them the name of the Wave I was visiting and they'll lessen the charges. It seems that in all the excitement, while all the screaming and yelling and fainting was going on, Selma Litts slipped back into her bed, and what with all the confusion and everything, nobody was able to remember which bed I was in.

Well, you know I wouldn't spill the beans about any woman, let alone the one I was going to marry. I'm a gentleman, always was, and besides, I'm kind of suspicious as to why everybody wants to know who she is.

I do a couple of months in the brig, and when I get out Selma tells me she thinks that I was very gallant for not revealing her name, but just the same what she said before still goes. She wants money in the bank even more now, since I'm an ex-Navy con. The Navy gives me my walking papers right after that and I go out to face the world.

With my brain power, it figures there'll be many companies looking to hire me immediately. I read in the newspapers how research engineers who can offer creativity are in great demand, so it comes as a surprise when the companies turn my applications down, just because I ain't a research analyst or an engineer. What these companies ignore is the fact that I've got imagination and creativity.

Anyway, now I'm thinking about all that's happened to me, and I'm just sitting looking out of my window, taking in the view that comes with my cheap room. It's hardly what you call magnificent. I'm on the second floor facing a gritty brick wall, and the rear door of the National Chemical Farmers Bank, which is always locked. The bank doesn't use it because that door faces out into the dirty alley.

There's a bunch of rubble down there, rusted tin cans, some old shoes, newspapers and lots of litter,

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and two alley cats hissing at each other. It's a grey day for me. I don't have a job, I don't have fifteen thousand dollars so I can marry Selma Litts, and looking at all the garbage in the alley makes me feel even lower.

All of a sudden the back door of the bank opens and two guys carrying guns come running out. One of them is wearing a lumber jacket and he's got a head like a chunk of poured cement. Then all hell breaks loose. The bank alarm goes off and two other guys carrying satchels come running out of the bank. It don't take more than a second and a bank guard is out in the alley firing after them. Bullets are flying and whining through the alley. One of the guys carrying a satchel drops, with the top of his head blasted clear away.

Another robber drops to his knees and starts firing. He hits the guard in the chest, and the guard drops on top of some cans. The gunman starts running for the satchel his pal has dropped, but the guard ain't finished. He's laying out flat on his stomach, but he pulls the trigger two times, missing. It's enough to make the robber give up any plans for the satchel and take off.

I watch it all, as though it's taking place in slow motion, like some kind of dream. Then it all gets clear. There's been a bank holdup. Four men had come running out of the bank. The bank guard had killed one of them, had himself been shot through the chest, and there's a satchel holding bank money just laying out there in the alley with nobody watching it.

It's enough for me. I run down the stairs and yank the back door open. The satchel ain't more than twenty feet away. The bank guard is stretched out with his face buried in a pile of rubble. I watch him all the time I'm running to the satchel, and he doesn't lift his head once. The guy he's shot is dead.

I grab the satchel and run back toward the doorway of my building, and unexpectedly two bullets ricochet off the wall next to my head. I catch a quick look. It's the guy in the lumber jacket, and I dive into the doorway as he fires more bullets my way.

Through the glass in the door I see one of the bank's employees jump out of the bank and he's firing at the man in the lumber jacket. I don't stick around to find out how things are going to work out. As I hit the stairs I hear an engine roaring and tires burning rubber. I run up the stairs to my room, drop the satchel on the bed and look out the window.

There's people out there now, kneeling next to the bank guard.

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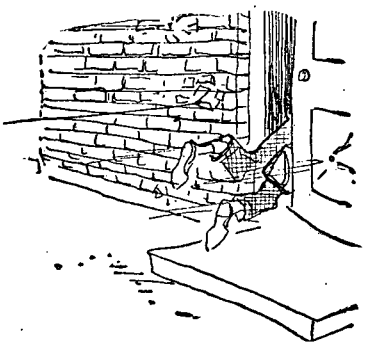
Somebody's shouting, "Get an ambulance!" There's the still body of the dead robber, and the man in the lumber jacket ain't in sight.

I duck into the hall, scoot down the hallway to an old storage room that holds some sooty mattresses and unassembled beds. I jam the satchel in behind a mattress and go back to my room.

Now there's an army of cops out



in the alley, and a sergeant's talking to old man Snelska, the landlord. Snelska's pointing at my window and it's enough to scare hell out of me, because all of a sudden I see him, the sergeant and two cops walking toward the doorway downstairs.

It comes to me quick then. I lock my door, strip, get into my pajamas. I drink a water glass of rye, spill some into my hands and muss my hair with it. Then I get into bed.

The cops rap on my door seconds later and one of them is shouting, "Open up! Police!"

I take my time answering, then open the door like a lush who's been wrenched out of bed in the middle of the night. There's the sergeant with a red, angry puss, two cops and old man Snelska in the hall.

"What's going on? What's the idea banging on my door like that?" I say like I'm half shot, but inside I'm jumping.

"The bank's been robbed," Old man Snelska hollers.

"No fooling?" I say. "You're kidding."

"Who kids about something like that? There's a stiff out in the alley and the bank's out fifty grand," Snelska says, all excited.

"Your window overlooks the alley," the sergeant says. "Did you see anything?" He sniffs and catches a whiff of the rye.

"Nothing. I been sleeping. Didn't hear a thing."

One of the cops grins. The sergeant mutters something under his breath, then says, "Go back to bed and sleep it off, bud."

"Thanks a lot for nothing," I tell him as he walks off. "Who asked you guys to come around and wake me up anyway? Huh?" I slam the door shut and lock it.

I got dressed again, went to the

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storeroom and counted the money. There was thirty thousand dollars. I put it back, stuffed the satchel behind the mattress and went back to my room. Everything was clear in my brain. I had more than enough money to marry Selma. She wanted fifteen and I came up with thirty. Talk about initiative.

One of the robbers had spotted me, but I had a strong feeling that he'd be mighty busy for a while trying to protect his own skin. I got into bed, put my hands behind my head and laughed for five minutes. I had it made. Selma would be discharged in two months. Life was going to be great.

I tried to call, couldn't reach her, and walked around on a cloud for the rest of the day. Later, I took a hundred dollars from the satchel and went out for a fine seafood dinner.

When I got back to my place the dream came to an end. There was a car parked across the street, with three men facing the front entrance of the building. I recognized the man who'd been wearing the lumber jacket; no lumber jacket now, but I recognized his face.

I almost panicked and ran, but forced myself to walk slowly around the corner. Then I went into the alley, got into the building using the rear entrance, and went to my room. I locked the door and stood in the darkness, trembling all over. All I wanted now was to get my hands on the money and take off. There was enough for a fast car or a plane ticket, but I had to move quickly.

I reached for the lock, but a knock at the door raised the hackles on my neck. I had a mental picture of the man in the lumber jacket standing out in the hall with a gun in his hand, waiting to kill me. It was like a bad dream. I stood frozen.

"Harold," a voice said on the other side of the door. It was Snelska, the landlord, but I jumped anyway. "I heard you running up the stairs, Harold," he said.

I switched on the light and opened the door.

He blinked. "What's the matter with you? Why are you standing in the dark? There was a man around to see you. He didn't know your name, but he described you and said he had a job for you."

I felt sick. "Did you give him my name?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure. I know you need a job."

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks a lot," and I shut the door.

Now I know I've got real big trouble. It ain't only the money they're after. I'm a witness to the crime; the bank guard is in critical shape over at the hospital; and it figures that those guys out in the

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car want to knock me off pronto.

Like I was saying before, I'm a good-looking guy with lots of brains, but I'm beginning to think I need some advice. For advice I have to go to a smart guy, and right away I think of Hot Rod Washburne.

I sneak downstairs to the hall phone and give him a buzz and tell him that I got trouble. I've known him a long time and he's a friend, so I tell him everything. He's so quiet while I'm talking that I think he's hung up, but he ain't. He's just listening and concentrating.

I say, "Washburne, you there?"

"Talk," he said. "Get on with it, you clod."

So I do, and I wind up by telling him that the robbers are parked right across the street in a big car. "There's three of them and they're ready to kill me."

"How much is in the satchel?"

"Thirty thousand."

"Hmm," he says. "I'll extricate you from your predicament, but the fee will be fifteen thousand dollars."

Hot Rod speaks real fancy, but I understand fifteen thousand dollars. That's half of thirty thousand dollars. There ain't nothing wrong with my figuring. "That's half," I holler.

"Well, suit yourself, my good man," says Hot Rod. "It's either fifteen thousand or else die."

Well, when he puts it that way, what choice do I have? "All right," I say.

"I've already formulated a plan. It's foolproof if you follow it to the letter. First you wait at a window overlooking the street, until you see me double park in front of the hotel, then you get the satchel, come downstairs and jump into my car. I'll take care of the rest."

"I don't think you understand, Hot Rod. Those boys with the big guns are sitting across the street ready to shoot me down."

"I am tired, tired, do you hear?" Hot Rod says. "Why must I listen to this eternal barrage of doubt? I'm tired of the disbelievers. Do you or do you not want to make your escape with fifteen thousand dollars and your life? I am contemptuous of all those who will not believe."

Well, when he starts talking like that, right away I feel much better. I'm telling you Hot Rod is a very smart guy. "Okay," I say. "I'll be looking for you."

"Fifteen minutes, dolt," he says, and hangs up.

Let me tell you it's a long fifteen minutes before I see his little red sports car pull up before the hotel. I can also see those crooks across the street, and I'm almost ready to call

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the whole thing off but I know it's too late. Besides, Hot Rod Washburne is my ideal, thirty-eight and ain't worked a day in his life. You got to have faith in people. I get the satchel and go downstairs with it.

When Hot Rod sees me coming, he opens the car door for me, and I make a fast dash and jump in. I can see the crooks in the car across the street pointing their fingers at me, and their eyes are bugging right out of their heads.

Then Hot Rod says, "Now smile at them and wave good-by like they're your friends."

I think Hot Rod is cracking up, but I don't have any choice, so I give them a big grin and a wave. It shakes them up real bad. It looks like they're arguing. Then Hot Rod slides his World War One pilot glasses down over his eyes, guns the engine, and we take off.

I kind of figure that this is the end of the trail, when I see those crooks take out after us. They're close enough now so that I can see them and they look like they're snarling. It looks bad.

They're not too far behind while we drive out of town and then Hot Rod turns onto the state highway. The crooks start to close in, but Hot Rod's looking in his side mirror and he don't seem worried. In fact, he's humming happily, like he's already counting his fifteen thousand dollars.

We're climbing a mountain now and the crooks stay right where they are, not gaining.

"Harold, my boy," Hot Rod says, "did I ever tell you that I attended the university? It was the closest I ever came to work. Frightening experience, that."

"Yeah, I knew you went away for a while."

"That's where I was, my boy, studying at one of our seats of higher learning."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. At the university there was a study made as to why so many of the good citizens of this country are mangled in automobile accidents."

We're near the top of the mountain now and I'm getting a little nervous. I say, "Hot Rod, those guys are closing in."

"Exactly," he says, as we got to the top of the mountain.

There's a sign that says: All trucks use low gear on the descent. Hot Rod gunned the engine and we began to descend the mountain.

I say, "Hey, Hot Rod, there's a guy hanging out the front window aiming his gun at us."

Hot Rod sighs, like he is tired. "Confounded idiots! We will have to lose them, that's all there is to it," and he hits the accelerator.

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I notice the speed then, because we're really flying down the side of the mountain. Below there's nothing except blackness and rocks. We're whipping around curves now.

"Hey, Hot Rod, maybe we ought to lose those guys some other place."

I look back and see that they're almost on our tail. A bullet goes whizzing by.

"Brazen nerve," Hot Rod says, and pours on the coal.

I figure, *So long, kid, so long fifteen grand, and so long, Hot Rod.*

I say, "Hot Rod, take it easy. There's a bad curve up ahead."

"You see that, do you, clod?"

And then as we go into the turn he gears down to low and floors the accelerator. The engine sounds as though it's going to explode and the car sways like it's going to flip, but it holds the road. The rear tires grab with all that extra power Hot Rod is putting on the wheels. He brakes hard and we look back.

Behind us the big car comes into the turn at high speed, with the brakes locked and the front wheels turned hard to the right. Only those crooks ain't going to the right. They're going straight ahead and they're still arguing. They go through the steel cable fence like it was never there. I count to five and there's a big booming noise at the bottom of the mountain. The sky gets a little lighter when the car starts burning.

Hot Rod pushes the clutch in and we drive slowly down the mountain. "It's all a matter of centrifugal force, my boy," Hot Rod explains. "A matter of applying low gear power at the proper moment going into the turn, as opposed to applying brakes, which will do absolutely nothing to overcome centrifugal force."

I don't know what he's talking about, but it don't make any difference. I give him his fifteen thousand dollars, then I put in a call to Selma at the base.

The Wave at the switchboard tells me that Selma went and got married to a Navy cook.

You never know how those things are going to work out. Here I am with the fifteen thousand dollars all ready. I guess she got tired of waiting.

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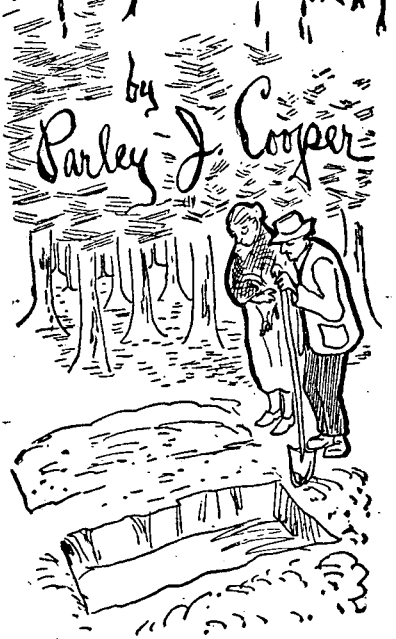
Perhaps one should consider first whether an act he undertakes in a humane manner would, after all, earn the undying gratitude of the recipient.

The Servant Problem

by Parley J. Cooper



THE old couple stood before the fresh mound of earth, their heads bowed in an expression of respect.

The man, bent and wrinkled, leaned wearily on the handle of his spade. His forehead glistened with perspiration and his trousers were creaseless, stained by the damp red earth from the mound. He looked at the hole that matched the one he had just filled. It was dark and empty, and he wondered if enough strength remained in his aching body to complete the task that lay ahead.

The woman gave the appearance of being fragile. Her shoulders were covered by a black knit shawl, but it was not enough to protect her from the sudden chill in the evening air. She raised her head and watched the treetops sway in the wind; she knew through years of observation that the first storm of the season was almost upon them, could sense it.

"It will rain soon," the man said, as though reading her thoughts. "We must hurry." He took her arm fondly and led her away from

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the mound. "I will see you back to the house."

She gave a heavy sigh, and leaned into the curve of his body for support. "Must we bury her tonight?" she asked and her answer was a nod of the man's head. "Perhaps it is best," she said. "Then it will be over." And she sighed again.

They left the pine grove with its well hidden grave and its waiting companion, and moved into the field in view of the house. She stepped away from him then as if contact were something she could no longer tolerate, and he moved ahead, not realizing she had fallen so far behind until he had reached the gate and turned to see her plodding slowly through the mist of the field. When she reached him, he was leaning against the frame of the open gate, staring at the house with a sadness in his eyes.

"We have lived here for so long," he said.

And she echoed, "So very long."

The house was not appealing to the eye; it was a giant structure reaching four stories high with a peaked roof higher than the surrounding pines. When it had been built, designers did not bother with new creations but reached backward in time to reproduce the most striking features of the past. Waterspouts with the heads of gargoyles stared from above at the couple.

A lamp had been lighted in one of the rooms. The glare through the undraped window stretched across the ground and fell just short of the man's feet. The couple could see the woman moving about inside. She was packing, wrapping the precious belongings of thirty years in wooden crates.

"You know what you must do," the man said.

"Must—must it be tonight?"

"Tonight," he answered. "Before she can realize he has gone without her."

If tears could have changed their situation, the woman would have shed them freely, but they were of no avail. In the old days—in the days of her father—all this would have been unnecessary. A servant's fate had been more certain in those days. They had been an important part of the family. If a house were to be sold as this one, the servants were assured of moving to the new house with their masters. But those days were past, as outdated as the house itself. In these modern times, there was no security for the serving class. The selling of a house could leave them homeless, turned into the cold at an age when another position was unobtainable.

"Give me time to reach the pine grove," the man told her. "Then you must send her."

"She will not know pain as he

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did?" she asked with concern.

He looked away, unable to face her. "It was unfortunate with him," he said. "No. She will not know pain."

"Then I will send her." It was the only solution to their problem.

She watched the man go back across the field toward the waiting grave. He walked slowly, the deadly spade swung over his shoulder. The wind, not being content to remain in the treetops, now reached down and lifted the mist about him.

He is a good man, she thought. *He is right in rebelling against the servant's modern fate.* When he had disappeared among the trees, she pulled her shawl about her shoulders and entered the house.

The woman inside was packing the last of the porcelain, her white head bent over a crate as she lay a delicate figure to rest in a bed of tissue. When she realized she was not alone in the room, she looked up.

"This is the last of—" The old hands dropped the figure and it smashed against the side of the crate. "You are so pale. What is it? What has happened?"

"An accident," the woman told her. She was panting as if she had run a long way. "In the woods—the pine grove."

The old woman rushed past her, leaving the door open to the wind. The rain had started and now beat gently against the sides of the house.

"There, it is done," the woman in the house sighed.

The man would be waiting in the grove. He would see that she met a near painless end, and then he would bury her beside her husband. The pine needles and the brush would soon cover their graves and they would be forgotten. Only a weak explanation need be given for their absence.

She went to the telephone, dialed the number of the local store, and waited for several minutes before she heard the familiar toneless voice of the grocer.

"This is Mrs. Clarke," she said. "I wanted to inform you that we shall no longer require our weekly deliveries. My husband and I have sold the house and taken a small apartment in the city . . . Thank you . . . We shall miss the resort . . . Maria and John? . . . Yes, they've found other positions. We're not one of those modern couples who turn their servants into the cold after years of service. We've seen that they have been properly taken care of."

She returned the receiver to its cradle and sighed with the completion of the task. Her lips felt dry. She poured herself a glass of sherry, then poured a second for her husband.

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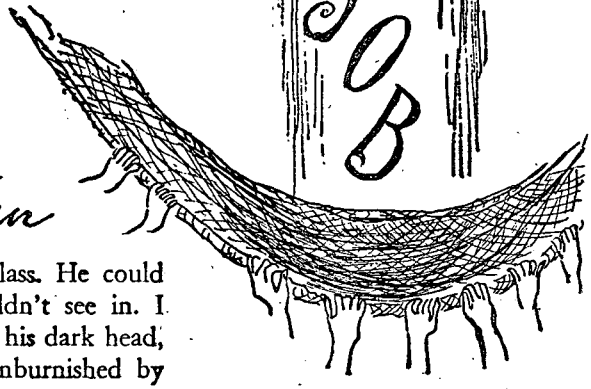
The "spare the rod" theory has the endorsement of many, but it seems others, well-seasoned men, administer more enlightened chastisement.

JUMP JOB

By Carl Henry Rathjen



I WAS hoping I wouldn't have that worried feeling about the kid again when he reported for the eight to four shift.

" 'Morning, Cap," Terry McLane said, as though it were just the start of another ordinary day for Police Emergency Squad Three. The average Joe wouldn't think anything we did was ordinary, but we take it in stride.

"It's going to be a hot one," I commented.

"It's that time of the year," he said, and hid his face in his locker. I still had that feeling. I'd seen his eyes, like one-way glass. He could look out, but I couldn't see in. I stared at the back of his dark head, curly as mine but unburnished by gray.

I heard noises from the far end

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of the room where Sergeant Hennessy, looking like a short sack of potatoes, was hoisting his dungaree zipper from groin to breastbone. I strolled down.

"Something on your mind, Henny?"

"What's on his?" he muttered. "Has he been taking cases home?"

I reviewed some of the things Terry had taken in stride with us after I'd picked him for the squad. The deputy chief inspector always lets me have my pick and I've never chosen a weak link yet. Maybe Terry would be the first one, but I wasn't thinking of my record. I liked the kid, and I also liked the rest of my squad. We had to work together. I didn't like it that Henny had confirmed my feeling.

I had to do some hard mulling to make a quick review, because in our job it's best to dismiss and forget the human crises we encounter. Calloused, you'd call us, but it's self-protection. We wouldn't last if we took home in memory the tot with a hand mangled in a garbage disposal, the blonde it took us two hours to free from car wreckage, the three guys in the sewer excavation cave-in. But Terry had already seen similar situations on a beat and in a patrol car before he'd applied to transfer to the Emergency Division.

I shook my head. "It's something outside of work, I'm sure of that."

"You'd better find out," said Henny.

"Are you giving me orders?"

He grinned. "Just suggesting."

So it wouldn't look too obvious, I stopped by my locker on the way back. I looked at the photo of Mame, gone five years. If I did bring something home and wanted to talk or growl it out of my system at her, she listened. Maybe that was Terry's trouble. He was eager to talk about his new job, but the gal he was going with wouldn't listen or wanted him to make another transfer. It was worth a try. I closed my locker.

"Speaking of weather," I said, approaching Terry, "we'll start getting calls for kids, and grown-ups too, who have gone in water over their depth. Mouth to mouth resuscitation is good, but use the gadget so you don't go picking up spinal meningitis or something."

"Good idea," agreed Terry.

"It applies to the bikini set too." I smiled. "Unless she happens to be your gal." Terry grinned. "Blonde, brunette, redhead?" I asked. "Or are you playing the field?"

"Redhead," he answered, and opened his wallet and showed me her picture. She was stacked, inside too, I mean, giving the impression she'd look right at you like that

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even if you weren't holding a camera. If the son Mame and I had lost in Korea had lived to bring home something like that . . .

"She makes me feel good about you," I said, handing back the wallet. "She's not going to cause you any trouble, except what you make yourself."

"Thanks, Cap. That's the way I feel too."

It was a glowy sort of reassurance, but I still had that worried feeling.

"When's the date you really start living?" I asked, and realized I'd touched the right button when he took a split-second to answer.

"We haven't got around to that yet," he said, looking for something in his locker.

"Why?" Nothing casual or curious. I hit him as bluntly as I could. He whipped his face around as though he was going to come back in kind. "Spill it, kid," I said.

He looked me in the eye, then at my gray hair, then in the eye again, then along the line of lockers. Henny had had sense enough to disappear, and I hoped he would hold off the others. I didn't want to invite Terry to the office. It might be just enough interruption to break the connection.

"It's not Jeanne, the redhead," he said. "It's the one before her, the one I broke off with."

"She got something on you?" I inquired. "Maybe threatening you?"

"No." He was very positive about that. "It's just that . . ." He lifted his strong hands helplessly. "Her name's Ellie, not a bad looker, and I guess that's all I looked at, at first."

"I did too when I was your age," I said.

He smiled wryly. "You didn't get hooked."

"Don't be so sure of that."

He nodded understandingly. "None of my business, but you must have got off the hook. I can't get off with Ellie. She won't let me go. That's why Jeanne won't set the date."

"She'll get over it," I said. "You just make it very clear you're set with Jeanne. Send back Ellie's letters unopened, refuse to take delivery on them, hang up if she phones, even slap her selfish face if she arranges *accidental* meetings."

"I've done all that, Cap. It's not that simple. She's threatening suicide."

I said a four-letter word, and then, "We're all set then. If she tries to scare you by taking an overdose of something, we'll have it all arranged that no one will listen to her denials when the stomach pump and Epsom salts are overworked on her."

He laughed at that, but it didn't last. "I hope you're right, Cap. I

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used to think she was just a nervous type. She's probably closer to being psycho. That's why I broke off. But I'm just worried enough she *might* go all the way, not bluff it. I wouldn't want to think it was because of me. I wouldn't want that on my conscience."

"*Your* conscience doesn't come into this," I said. "You didn't leave her in any kind of trouble, so—"

"I know, but still the thought is there and I can't shake it. That's why Jeanne won't set a date. When I carry her across the threshold, she wants to know the door is locked behind us, not left ajar."

"That Jeanne is a gal. Don't lose her, Terry. Any girl who could be told what you told her, and still—"

"She works in the same office with Ellie," he said. "I had to tell her."

"You would have told her anyway," I said. He nodded. "Now forget Ellie. You broke off fair with her. If she doesn't want to play it that way, that's not your—"

Just then the booth sergeant broke his thumb on the alarm button. I slapped Terry's arm.

"Cut off, kid. We got a job. When we come back, just hook up with Jeanne."

We rolled out Squad Three's truck with siren wailing at morning commuter traffic. We were needed by Emergency Patrol Car 226—Morgan and Rubinatti. They wanted our jacks, body bag, and mops for a man under the subway express in the Plaza Station. Terry crawled under with me. Before I could caution him about the third rail, though the power was off, he cautioned me. So, despite the circumstances, I began to feel good. I'd talked him into keeping his mind on the job. Hennessy came worming along, collecting for the bag. Terry gently extended the head dangling from a fistful of hair.

"I wonder if he was pushed off or jumped."

I knew Ellie was still with us.

"Pushed," I said sharply. "No jumper picks a crowd unless he's hoping to be restrained."

Henny paused on the ties beneath the car and gave me a look which told me he'd eavesdropped on the conversation in the locker room. I motioned him on toward what could have been a roll of newspapers or a leg. When I climbed to the platform, Martinez met me with the clipboard.

"Suicide, Cap. I found his wallet and glasses in a phone booth. There was a note too. Any more dope you want on this?"

"Give it a number and bury it in the files," I said for the benefit of Terry who was staring up from the tracks.

He slapped his hands on the edge

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and bobbed up onto the platform.

"Okay if I make a quick phone call?"

"We haven't got time to dally around. We got to be ready for the next job."

"Sure," he said sarcastically. "I hope you guess better on that one."

I still felt I'd given him good advice, and I kept him too busy to grab a phone to call Ellie. Before we got back to quarters the radio diverted us. It was a simple job, one that could have been handled by Statts and Enright from car 227, but they were giving oxygen to a cardiac. So I held a howling pudgy kid on my lap in the tenement kitchen and steadied his hand on the table. Terry slipped with the ring-cutter and snipped swollen flesh. The kid's shriek felt like an ice-pick to my eardrum. Henny took the ring-cutter from Terry.

Back in the rig, sitting beside Henny, I checked Emergency Three back into service. Henny wheeled slowly uptown.

"Did I ever tell you about my oldest boy, Cap?"

"Too many times," I retorted.

Henny ignored the hint. "He's joined a club at school and right now he's all for the birds. Birds have got something, though. They kick the young out of the nest when they're old enough to take care of themselves." Henny refused to be crowded by a taxi and exchanged wordless epithets with the driver before he went on to me. "And they won't put up with weaklings, either."

I waited until Henny nudged around a corner through a stream of pedestrians.

"The nearest I come to being a bird is a cuckoo, for being in this business. How many others in the squad are griping about Terry besides you?"

"I haven't inquired. Pardon me for opening my mouth."

"No apologies needed. He's a good kid, Henny."

"Sure. I'll go along, Cap."

I got the message, and Terry got one too when we backed into quarters and the booth sergeant handed him a slip. He started for the unofficial pay phone. I placed my hand over the dial.

"I'm not going to stop you," I said, "but you've got another decision to face. You haven't made any big mistakes yet with us, but you will if you keep on this way. This division doesn't make any allowance for them, because a mistake means somebody gets hurt or killed. So make up your mind, kid. Are you going to take orders from me or from her?"

I pulled my hand from the dial and walked into the office and closed the door. In about twenty minutes

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my phone rang. It was the Deputy Chief Inspector.

"What goes on, Captain? I've just told off a young woman who phoned to insist that I use my official capacity to make one of your men, Terence McLane—"

"Her name was Ellie, sir," I cut in, feeling very good. "It's a closed personal matter as far as McLane is concerned, and I hope you weren't diplomatic in telling her off."

"I wasn't," he replied, "and I won't be tactful with you and McLane if I receive any more calls of this nature."

I didn't know whether to be glad or worried by this turn. I sent for Terry. "Congratulations on your decision."

"How did you know?" he asked.

"A bird told me. Ask Henny about them. And be sure to let me know the date you and Jeanne set."

He frowned. "I hope I'm doing the right thing."

"You are. Now lock the door behind—"

The booth sergeant broke his thumb again. "220 West 44th," he called, chalking it on the board. "Woman on the twentieth floor ledge."

Terry's face went chalky. "That's where Ellie works! I knew I should have phoned—"

"Who said it's her?" I barked.

"But the twentieth floor is where—" shuddering, he stopped.

I shoved him toward the rig and felt as scared as he looked.

"Want to bet on it?" Henny muttered as I piled in beside him.

He took us through the noonhour clutter by the skin of Truck Three's paint. My thoughts weaved too. Jumper jobs are the worst in our book. Worse than a bomb scare, shooting it out with a holed-up fugitive, or looking for a gas leak in a building ready to blow up. You never know, with a jumper. Might be a drunk, somebody sick or all drugged up, or a lousy show-off risking the lives of good men; and it could be an all-out psycho willing to take you down too.

Terry's Ellie? Even if it was, no matter who it was, it was our job to prevent it. Some people demand why? Let 'em leap! We can't. One of those questioners might be the next one up there because just the right combination of things makes him or her *temporarily* think there's no other way out, nothing left to live for. If it was Terry's Ellie, and we saved her or lost her, either way what was it going to accomplish for him?

Nothing! He'd be hooked to her or have a guilty conscience the rest of his life.

Swearing, I stood up and waved my arm and jawed at the crowd that made Henny slow to a crawl

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on Forty-fourth. People leaned from windows, jammed on fire escapes. A lot of them ate lunch and drank pop like it was a picnic. Eyes and arms pointed up.

Twenty floors up, the slim girl stood on a ledge between two windows. Beyond reach of extended hands to either side, she slouched one shoulder against the wall like she was pouting and waiting for a date.

I knew the answer when I looked at Terry—the clenched jaw, the white canvas of his face with torn holes for eyes. I clamped his arm. "Don't go off on your own! Do you understand?"

He nodded jerkily, looking up.

Truck Five was trying to reopen the trail we'd made into Forty-fourth. Truck Seven inched from the opposite direction.

"Henny!" I ordered. "Up!"

His head made a quick chop. Squad Three began hauling off gear. Seven or Five would take care of the ground net. A lot of good that would do if she came down. Wouldn't do much more than keep her from splattering.

Terry and I raced in to an elevator. Air whispered around the car. Terry watched the crawl of green light across the floor numbers above the doors.

"Terry?" He didn't look at me. "Remember what I told you this morning. It's none of your doing. Nothing on your—" The doors snicked open, and he lead the way down the hall, around a corner, through a doorway that had something about insurance on the frosted pane.

Terry spun a castored chair aside. He pulled at people hanging out a window. "Get out of the way!"

A little redhead turned. I recognized Jeanne from her photo in Terry's wallet. At sight of him she looked relieved, but sad. She knew, the same as I did. Nothing good was going to come out of this for Terry. She hooked her fingers in the waistband of a fat guy's pants.

"J.B., get out of the way!"

The fat guy turned, looking as though he were going to add a coronary to our problems.

Terry leaned out. "Ellie?

I couldn't see her and didn't try. Sometimes too many people can spoil it. I put my hand on Terry's shoulder.

"Don't go out there, kid. Talk her in, if you can. Or hold her until we get set. Say anything. Even . . . offer marriage. But don't go out there! Terry? Do you understand?"

Jeanne grabbed onto his dungarees. "I won't let him go out."

"Thanks," I said, then backtracked fast to the elevator. The stairs were too chancy. I might get

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locked on them until the squad came up. The elevator doors slid back, revealing Martinez, half my squad and some of Five's, with block and tackle, field telephones. I jammed in with them.

"Henny's on nineteen," Martinez said. "Where do we go, Cap?"

"She's outside of 2060," I answered. "So if the layout's the same up here—"

The doors opened and we spread out to windows above and to either side of Ellie on the ledge below. Martinez and I took the one nearest above her. We hauled and pushed until people got willingly out of our way. I leaned out. The white parting in her dark hair gleamed about ten feet below and five more to my right. She still leaned against the building, with the toe of one slipper hooked over the edge. Far below the street was a canyon clogged with a logjam of rigs, cars, and people, with a cleared area below Ellie. Terry's torso jutted from the window below me. Little white fists clutched his dungarees.

"Ellie! Listen to me, honey! Look at me!"

From the nineteenth floor window beneath him, Henny's face squinted up. I glimpsed Seven Squad way down in the cleared area, just blobs moving on legs that couldn't be seen from above, two blobs to each pole of the rope ground net. Terry still pleaded with Ellie. From the window on the other side, a man in clerical black extended a pink palm, but she just stared out, ignoring him, like a pouting kid.

Pulling myself in, I glanced around the office. The men were paying out lines and the bundled wall net, while Henny's crew waited two floors below. Martinez finished making contact all around on a field phone. You don't shout from floor to floor when you've got a poised jumper, and for the same reason we couldn't use the lifebelt. That's okay for someone *wanting* to be rescued. The brake line, suddenly dangling past, gives hope, not an incentive to jump because someone is about to make a grab.

I helped a couple men shift a steel desk to jam it by the window. Martinez moved in with coiled line.

"She's ten down, five to the side," I told him.

He nodded, measuring off line. "I'll give you about thirteen."

One of the men corrected him. "Don't use that dirty word. Give him something above twelve, under fourteen."

I whipped a bowline-on-a-bight; the bowline for my chest, the loops for each thigh, just in case things started to get out of control before the wall net was rigged. The gawking noonday crowd didn't help. A chant began, swelling in macabre

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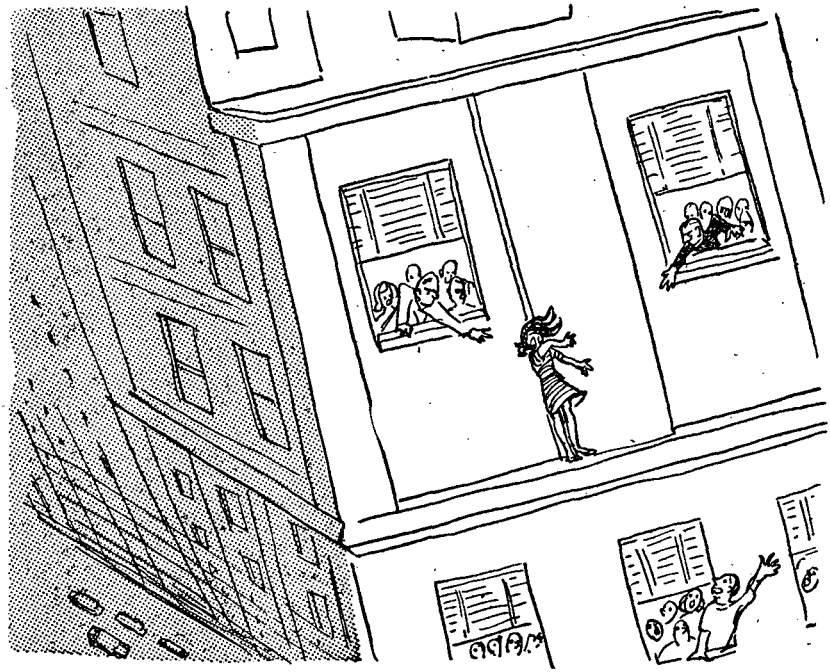

volume, voodoo-like in rhythm.

"Jump . . . jump . . . *jump* . . . JUMP . . ."

Swearing, I tested my knots. Martinez lashed and padded line around the steep desk.

". . . jump . . . jump . . ."

I peered out. Ellie no longer leaned against the building. The cleric had both pink palms extended toward her. I didn't see Terry below me. Just the redhead was leaning out, her pleading hand extended, her manner suggesting anger but trying not to show it. Below, Henny's crew thrust out extension poles to hook loops of the wall net. The guide and brace lines hung slack. I raced around to Martinez who was back at the field phone.

"What the hell's taking them so long?"

He answered calmly. "It looks like a record setup, Cap, even with the thirty seconds more they need."

Terry dashed in, eyeing my bowline.

"This is my job, Cap."

"I thought I told you—"

"Don't argue," he snapped, tugging at my line.

That damn chant came in the window. ". . . jump . . . jump . . . jump . . ."

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I couldn't do a thing to stop Ellie with the line half off me, so I helped Terry into it—and felt like a hangman. Nothing good was going to come of this. Terry's future was down the drain.

He crouched on the windowsill. Some of the ghouls in windows across the way even tried to point Ellie's attention up to him. I peered out past him. Her slim body teetered on the edge of the ledge diagonally below.

". . . jump . . . jump . . jump . . ."

Below, the wall net wasn't quite ready. Just a few more minutes and we could swing it up to pin her against the building. She glanced up. Maybe it was surprise or anger at seeing Terry poised above her; maybe it caused her to lose her precarious balance; maybe it was just a nudge of breeze; maybe she did it deliberately.

There was no mistaking the message in the dark wild eyes.

"She's going!" I shouted.

Terry was already on his way, plunging as she sort of floated out from the ledge below. Too late. Her torso was beyond his reaching arms. He clamped around her thighs before the line jerked him short. A sound came from the mob, an engulfing, gasping sob.

Terry and Ellie gyrated wildly. The cleric and others reached out gingerly. The mob was roaring. The pink-palmed cleric had guts. He went way out. Terry's boots scraped and kicked masonry. The cleric missed catching hold.

A thought streaked past in my head as I tried to steady the line. Terry had deliberately kicked away from that window.

Swinging, booting the masonry to avoid being banged against it, he reached down, locked fingers in her streaming hair and pulled her upright, face to face. I couldn't hear what he said, but I could see his lips moving. I saw the look in her eyes get wilder. Then he let go. Her scream pierced the howl of the crowd as she dropped away.

She fell—six feet—into Henny's net, just barely tightened in time.

I didn't wait for an elevator this time. The firestair doors were wedged open. I raced into 1960, two floors below, just as Henny and his crew hauled in Ellie and Terry, who must have dropped to the net, too, after releasing from his line. He swung her around to face him.

"You were lucky this time. But I warn you, if there's any more of this—"

I bellowed. "Don't let go of her. Watch that open window."

She cringed away from him, and I got between them before he could say things to her I didn't want others to overhear.

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Jeanne, the redhead, moved in. Her hand went whack-whack-whack across Ellie's face.

"Thanks," I said to her again. I pushed her toward Terry. "Don't let him talk to anyone," I muttered. She gave me a knowing look. I backed Ellie against the wall. There were a lot of things I wanted to say and could have said, but I had to be careful.

"I'm not going to back him against a wall," I said.

"You should," she quavered. "He tried to—"

"You just remember that," I cut in. "And don't ever try to prove it."

She shuddered. I let the ambulance guys take over.

Then I saw my boss, the deputy chief inspector. He gravely nodded me to one side. "Was that the young lady who phoned me?"

"I don't believe she'll do that again, sir."

I was looking at eyes like one-way glass again.

"Have you asked McLane if he knew whether or not the wall net was ready when he—"

"When she slipped from his grasp?" I suggested. The D.C.I. just looked at me. I went on carefully. "Unless there's good valid reason, sir, I prefer not to ask. It might spoil a good man by letting him think I don't trust him."

The D.C.I. glanced toward Ellie and the ambulance guys. "I've always relied on your judgment about men." His glance shifted to the door where a couple of uniforms were holding back the press. "You and your squad get cleaned up here, Captain. I'll take care of talking to the press."

"Thank you for relieving us of that, sir."

He smiled. "Don't mention it."

I found Terry and Jeanne in J.B.'s inner sanctum. The door had one of those noiseless catches, so I had to cough twice before they saw me.

"I hope you do a better job of hanging onto her," I said. "Because if you ever let her slip away, there won't be a net ready to catch her. Just me."

Terry winked. Jeanne kissed me. For a moment I missed my Mame real bad. But otherwise I felt very good.

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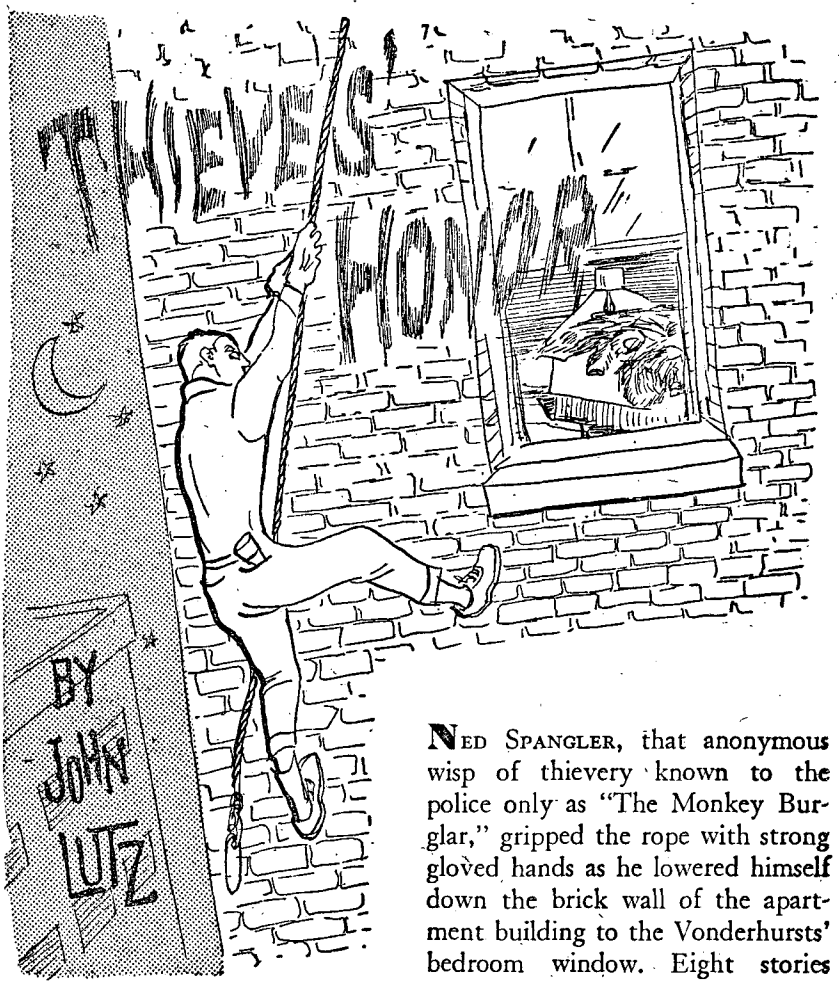
Love, it seems, generates a magnanimity seldom paralleled by other motivating forces.



NED SPANGLER, that anonymous wisp of thievery known to the police only as "The Monkey Burglar," gripped the rope with strong gloved hands as he lowered himself down the brick wall of the apartment building to the Vonderhursts' bedroom window. Eight stories

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below him the Ninth Avenue traffic continued to stream by, a myriad of moving lights, faint sounds muted by the night air. The office building across the street was dark, no danger of being seen. Cautiously, he moved his head to look into the Vonderhurst apartment.

The light was on in the bedroom, showing it to be unoccupied, but what Spangler was after lay carefully arranged on the oversized bed. He carefully tried the window and it raised with very little noise.

From beyond the closed bedroom door came laughter, a woman's squeal and the clink of glasses, the sounds of a party. Spangler smiled. The society page was a burglar's best friend. He swung lightly into the room and looked at the guests' expensive furs spread out on the bed. Swiftly he took from inside his shirt a large burlap sack and stepped toward them.

He was hurriedly stuffing the first coat, an expensive sable, into the sack when the door opened. Still bent over the luxurious array of fur, he stared at the girl, then quickly turned to leap for the window. He didn't though, because the girl was now holding a small, deadly-looking automatic which she had produced from the evening bag she was carrying.

Keeping beautiful, unblinking gray eyes on him, she closed the half-opened door with her foot. Dressed in a white evening gown that flattered a perfect figure, her blonde hair was pulled back tight from a well-sculpted face that was unmarred by makeup. And now there was a strange gleam in her eyes, a gleam which Spangler didn't understand.

He stood frozen, awaiting the

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girl's next move. She had him cold.

"I believe 'red-handed' is the term," she said coolly. The gun didn't waver.

Spangler relaxed slightly. She wasn't going to shoot or scream, at least not right away. "It's the term," he said, measuring the distance to the window, knowing he couldn't make it even if she were a lousy shot.

"What's your name?" the girl asked, and the question was so unlikely it took Spangler by surprise for a moment.

"The police will fill you in later," he answered after a pause.

"Maybe that doesn't have to happen. Maybe we can make a deal."

Did he see the corners of her mouth lift slightly in a hidden smile? "I'm hardly in a position to make a deal."

"That's exactly why I suggested it," the girl said. There was amusement in her gray eyes. "A man like you, with your novel way of making a living, with that scar on your face, could easily be identified and traced by the police."

Spangler fingered the long scar running down his left cheek, a scar he'd gotten from his partner of ten years ago in a circus brawl. The lady was right. It wouldn't be hard for the police to trace an ex-tumbler who was so marked.

The girl continued, "Even if I were to let you leave this room I'd still have you in an uncompromising position, a position in which you could hardly afford *not* to deal." She leaned back against the closed doors and looked at him appraisingly.

Spangler searched her face, found nothing. "Out with it," he said.

"Yorktown 5-0305, my phone number," the girl said calmly. She repeated it. "You'll call it within three days, or . . ."

"You cry wolf," Spangler interrupted.

She nodded, and he had to admire her poise. Keeping the gleaming automatic aimed at him, she crossed to the bed and picked up a mink stole. "I always leave a party early," she said. Gracefully backing to the door still watching him, she slipped the gun back into her purse. "I estimate that no other guest will enter this room for at least ten minutes." Again, her lips hinted a smile. "What you do with that time is your business." Then she was gone.

Spangler stood motionless for a moment, still in a kind of relieved shock. Then he went to work. He selected only the finest furs, packing them hastily but expertly into his sack so they'd take up the least possible space. He even checked the closet, where he found the best

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of the lot, Mrs. Vonderhurst's long, dark mink with her monogram in the lining.

Tying the drawstrings of the now bulging sack, Spangler stepped to the window and took a last look around. Then he tied the sack to his belt, reached for the waiting rope and climbed out of the window. Despite his encounter with the girl, he felt the familiar thrill and satisfaction. He had only to climb two stories to the roof, then use the rope to lower himself down the back of the building to the fire escape that led into the alley where his car was parked. In forty-five minutes he'd be home sipping his customary after-the-job drink, a good five thousand dollars richer.

On the third day he called her. He had to tell her his name and, surprisingly, she told him hers—Veronica Ackling. When Spangler heard the name he realized why she would be at a cocktail party given by a wealthy art patron like Mrs. Vonderhurst. Veronica's husband, Herbert Ackling, was a well-known collector of rare books, and the Ackling name appeared quite often on the society page.

Veronica wasn't coy. She told Spangler what his part of the deal would be. She simply wanted him to rob her of her jewelry, without her husband's knowledge, and Spangler would get ten percent of the insurance money plus ten percent of the price he could get for the jewels. Her husband, she said, was a miser who clung selfishly to every dollar, and she was on an allowance that was hardly suitable to her tastes. The robbery and insurance settlement, she assured Spangler, could be handled without her husband's knowledge, since he would be in Europe for the next month tracking down a rare first edition.

There was something about the deal that didn't smell right. Spangler, by nature a methodical and solitary operator, would rather have skipped it. A partner was something he didn't need or want, least of all an imponderable woman like Veronica Ackling. But, dammit, she had him trapped.

He felt much better about the deal when Veronica told him the jewelry was insured for ninety thousand dollars. That meant nine thousand guaranteed, and his other ten percent would add up to a worthwhile sum, even after the cut he'd have to take on the value of the jewels when he sold them. Spangler had stolen jewelry before, while traveling with the circus, so he knew ninety thousand dollars worth of jewelry sometimes amounted to less than thirty thousand when it reached the greedy

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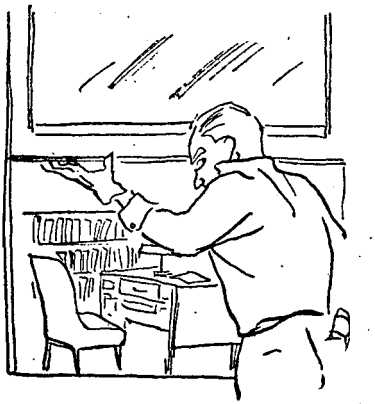
but hesitant hands of a wary fence.

Veronica told him the incredibly simple plan for the robbery, and he left the phone booth from which he was calling and walked preoccupied out the door, already turning over the details of the theft in his mind.

At two a.m. Spangler climbed noiselessly on rubber-soled shoes up the five flights of stairs to the top floor of the Freemont Apartment Building. The Freemont was not quite so exclusive as the Barton Arms next door, where the Acklings lived, so there was no doorman. He walked quickly down the long corridor and found the service passage to the roof, just where Veronica said it would be. He picked the crude mechanism of the cheap padlock that barred his way and in a few seconds opened the rooftop door to the sudden, cold blast of winter.

The gangway between the Barton Arms and the Freemont Apartments was ten feet wide, but Spangler leaped easily onto the roof of the Barton Arms. Wasting no time, he paced off the proper distance along the edge of the roof to be sure he was over the window of the Acklings' third floor apartment, then moved about four feet to the side to be certain the rope wouldn't be visible from the windows on the upper floors. He tied one end of his rope to the sturdy base of a lightning rod, then let the other end, weighted so it would not be affected by the wind, down the side of the building.

The window to Herbert Ackling's den was locked, as Spangler and Veronica had agreed it would be and Spangler quickly solved that with the aid of an efficient glass cutter. Wearing gloves, he turned the lock, slowly raised the window, and entered Herbert Ackling's den.



There was no one home, of course. Ackling was in Europe, and Veronica was out establishing a firm alibi for herself to dispel any suspicions the insurance company might have. By the thin yellow beam of his flashlight Spangler rummaged through the den to make the robbery look genuine, even pocketing an expensive lighter from the desk top for effect. Then he made his way into the bedroom and pulled open all the dresser drawers. In the top

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drawer, behind an unruly tangle of scarves and nylon hose, he found the jewelry box.

Spangler set the box on the floor and easily sprung the flimsy lock. In the beam of the flashlight the jewelry sparkled dazzlingly. He could well believe there was ninety thousand dollars worth here. Admiring each sparkling piece, he hurriedly filled the special pocket he had sewn into the lining of his jacket.

As he stood by the den window, feeling the comfortable weight of the jewelry against his side, Spangler flashed the beam of his light around with satisfaction. As far as the police and the insurance company were concerned, this would be just one more bit of work by "The Monkey Burglar." Then, silently, he left.

"Do turn out the light, darling." Veronica lay on Spangler's bed with the covers pulled up around her chin. Her eyes were closed to the light and, though there was a delicate frown line between her eyebrows, she was smiling faintly.

It was early morning, and Spangler sat on the edge of the bed contemplating his good fortune. He loved Veronica, he knew. When she had delivered the money, they'd had a few drinks, talked, and discovered they were very attracted to each other. Veronica's social position in no way awed Spangler. Though Spangler loved with a certain reserve, he was completely fascinated by this woman whose aristocratic coolness could turn like the flip of a card to deep passion.

Spangler, already dressed, turned off the bedside lamp and the half-light of dawn filtered through the slanted blinds. He propped a pillow behind his head and smiled at the fragrance of her expensive perfume.

"I have an idea," Veronica said, and rested her head against his shoulder. "I want you to rob me again."

"Did I hear you right?"

"It's not really a bad idea, darling." Her eyes caught the sunlight in the room. "You've robbed the same place twice on occasion. It's part of your 'modus operandi'."

"I'm not worried about getting away with it," Spangler said, "and I suppose the insurance company would come through again; there'd be no doubt it was the work of the same man. But why be greedy?"

Veronica said calmly, "Herbert's going to France again next week, and if there's one more robbery, if I can have just that much more money, I'll leave him. They're my jewels. Let him just try to get the insurance money back—if he can find me."

"And you'll be?"

"With you."

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Spangler was silent for a few minutes. That part of him that looked at things objectively knew he didn't really have any more choice this time than he'd had before. There was no way he could involve Veronica if she chose to turn him in, no way he could prove their alliance. He wondered if there were some detached and aloof part of Veronica's mind that thought the same thing.

"How much are your new jewels insured for?" Spangler asked.

"Eighty thousand. I used my share of the insurance money to replace the stolen ones. Herbert's unaware of the whole thing, of course. He never noticed what kind of jewelry I wore, or if I wore any, for that matter."

Spangler reached over to the nightstand and rooted through Veronica's purse for a pack of cigarettes. "I don't know," he said.

"This time you can have half of whatever you get for the jewels."

Another payday like the last appealed to Spangler. He wouldn't have to take a risk for a long time with that kind of money, and the thought of going away with Veronica appealed to him almost as much.

"Agreed," he said, and gently pulled her to him.

Veronica smiled. "We'll spend it together," she said before she kissed him.

A week later Spangler was at work again. He'd climbed the stairway of the Freemont and onto the roof. He'd leaped the gangway again and repeated his pacing off of distance and securing and lowering of the rope. Now he hung against the cold, unyielding wall, buffeted by a brisk winter wind that made his ears ache. He'd be glad to get inside.

He inched his way toward the window with his free hand and foot, surprised to see that this time a light burned in Herbert Ackling's den. Had Veronica forgotten to turn it off? Spangler cautiously looked into the room.

There was Herbert Ackling, his head resting on his desk top like that of a schoolboy taking an afternoon nap—only a brilliant scarlet pool of blood covered the top of the desk and the open book he'd been reading. On the thick carpet, just inside the window that Spangler now saw was flung wide open, lay the glinting automatic that Veronica always carried in her purse, the gun that Spangler had handled a dozen times. Then he knew.

Suddenly Veronica stood in the doorway, screaming loud and long. There was no expression of shock on her face as she looked at Spangler and the body; she would save that for an appreciative audience. She turned and ran.

With lightning speed Spangler

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pulled himself hand-over-hand up the rope. Why hadn't he thought of it? Now Veronica, the Veronica he loved, would have Ackling's insurance money. She also had something more important: a made-to-order murderer for the police.

Spangler reached the roof and ran over the tar and gravel surface toward the opposite edge. As he leaped the gangway with a yard to spare, he heard the wavering wail of a siren. Then he was in the Freemont building, descending the stairs in long, desperate leaps. The wail of sirens grew steadily louder. It would be close, close. He didn't care if he made noise now.

As his feet hit the bottom floor, Spangler raced down the long corridor toward the rear door. There was a sudden whooshing of air and a burst of sound as the front door opened. Spangler faintly heard a voice call "Halt!" He didn't hear a shot, but something ricocheted off the tile wall next to him, sending ceramic chips flying. He didn't hesitate, but hit the back door hard. It opened, and he was in the gangway that he'd just leaped, five stories above, a few seconds ago.

He stood still for a split second, gasping, then ran again. From a window high in one of the buildings a woman's voice screamed, "Murderer!" and a flashing red light suddenly appeared at the end of the gangway toward which Spangler was running. He spun on his heel, but this time as he heard the shots he experienced a searing pain.

Still conscious, Spangler lay on his back looking up at the narrow band of bright winter stars between the two buildings. The cement was hard and cold against his back, but his hands rested in something warm and sticky. He knew he was losing blood fast.

He heard a deep, authoritative voice say, "Out, out. Keep everyone out of the gangway until the ambulance arrives."

Spangler didn't care about the ambulance. He was thinking of Veronica, and strangely he felt no anger toward her. It was the game. She'd outwitted him, and for that he could only admire her. Damned if he didn't hope she'd enjoy the insurance money.

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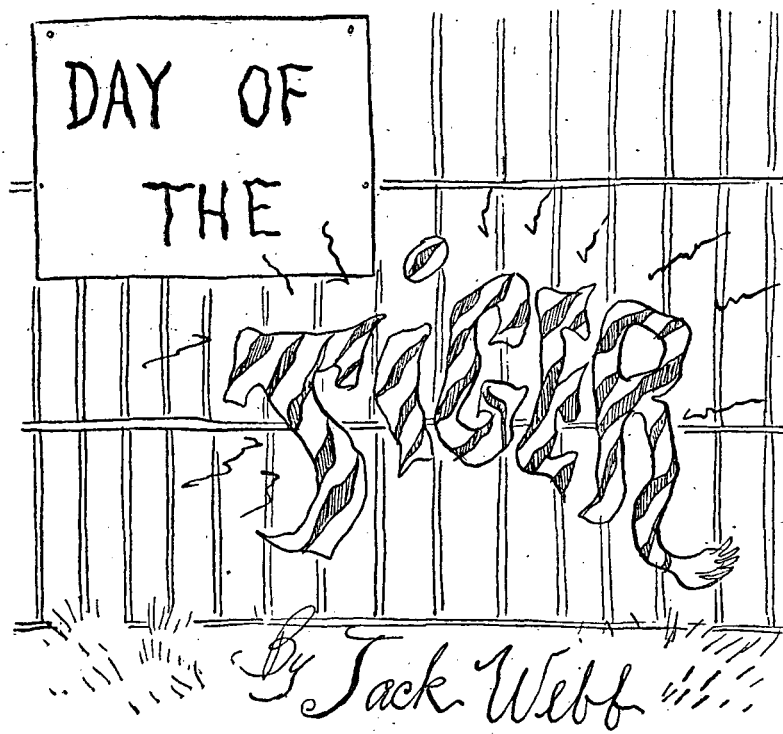
If one recalls having been regarded, in return, at the zoo, he may conclude that the most fascinating creatures of all are the transients.



THE THIRD shot fired by Officer Shelby struck Dandy Fornos in the calf of his left leg. It was a slight wound, cutting through the edge of the flesh, slashing twice through the cheap wool of his charcoal slacks, but it put the fear of the devil in his heart and wings on his heels. He did not drop the briefcase which was all that was left of the shambles behind him: the car with its engine block smashed by a .357 Magnum slug; Ronnie and Joe, dead; the cop crumpled behind

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the wheel of the black and white sedan, and the other on his stomach in the road, shooting, shooting.

Away to the right was a line of thick shrubs along a high steel mesh fence. Dandy turned and fled toward them.

Shirley Duff braked her car hard and fast and pressed the horn. What was the crazy fool doing, rushing blindly across this side street, sport coat flying, clutching that silly briefcase with both hands?

North from the way she was driving, more sirens than before were wailing. She was glad she had come into the park over the bridge from the south. She was in no mood to be stopped by a fire or an accident, however grim it might be.

She parked the small sport coupe competently a little way from the entrance of the zoo. What a foolish place to meet, but it was safe. Tom was clever about such things, almost too clever.

Her long legs were elegant as they reached from the edge of the seat to the pavement. Her blue silk suit was freshly pressed, and her soft brown hair shone in the sunlight. She was quite young, pretty, and in love. It showed in the way she walked and in the proud way she carried her shoulders as she hastened toward a destiny where all birds sang.

At the turnstile to the zoological gardens, she had to wait while the man ahead of her received his change.

He was a slim individual, neither much older nor much taller than she. His thin, blond hair was sparse at the temples, and his gray flannel, although it had been a good suit once, was shabby now, not so much with wear but as though he no longer cared about his personal appearance —like his shoes, good leather, well shaped, but desperately needing a polish.

Tom would never become like that, she thought. Vaguely, Shirley felt a little sorry for the unhappy young man. But this was no day for that! This was a day for casting away all regrets, all fears . . .

Not so for Allen Trask. He hurried away from the pretty girl behind him at the turnstile, for there had been something in the tilt of her chin, the directness of her brown eyes, that had reminded him of Anne—not much, but enough. Now Anne was dead, and he had killed her as surely as though he had held a knife, taken a gun . . .

He did not pause at the reptile house which came first along the road to the exhibits. Snakes were dreadful things, death in a coil, death in a shady corner, and he had had enough of death.

Then, coming to the zoo, there had been the siren, and now there

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were more, running closer, and it was all beginning again—the dread cry that had been there in the night, the first sound he had heard after smashing through the guard-rail; seeing the lights askew where the car had crashed, hearing the scream, the terrible cry of the sirens coming, focusing on the distorted ring of faces about him, finding awful words to ask and no one to tell him of Anne, of Anne who had been on the seat beside him . . .

At a cage of macaws, he paused. With their wise, sober eyes, they regarded him from clown faces. Each bird was clothed in bright feathers, blue and yellow, red and green; glorious birds. One, with a bright yellow breast and long banners of blue for wings, hooked its way down the tall side of steel mesh until it hung opposite him. "Pretty Polly," it rasped at Allen Trask.

"Pretty Polly," Allen said bleakly.

The girl went by, her tall heels clicking. The gaudy parrots watched the girl.

"Pretty Polly," Allen repeated.

The blue and yellow macaw grumbled.

Through the glass door marked "Director," John Krueger saw the boy with the briefcase fumble for the price of admission, enter the zoo and hurry out of sight down the road toward the reptile house. It was a warm day, but not so warm that beads of perspiration should stand out on the boy's forehead, and why did he hurry so much with such a difficult limp? Krueger's eyes crinkled thoughtfully. He would not admit to his premonitions, yet the very business he was in depended upon them. Take those two cocky sailors last week—something about the way they had laughed. They had bothered him so much he had followed them later, and found them heating pennies with a cigarette lighter to toss into a cageful of inquisitive monkeys.

The phone rang on his desk. He lifted it and listened. "Sheba's begun," Pete told him. His tone was excited. "Doc Chapman thought you would want to come."

"You bet," Krueger said to the cat keeper. "Take care of things till I get there."

At the door to his office, Krueger paused to speak to the girl at the switchboard. "I'm going to be busy, Marge. The tiger's cubs are coming."

"Yes, Mr. Krueger."

He went out the door and climbed into his car. Last year, they had lost Sheba's litter. This time . . . He started the car and swung it around onto the road. There was a spot of color, and another, and another, shining dark in the sun-

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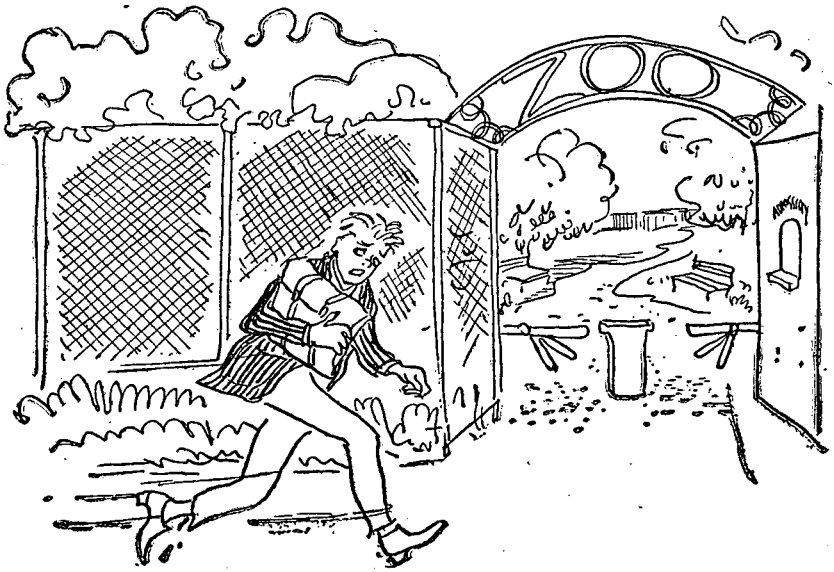

light against the pavement top. Krueger slowed and stared at the road. Blood! Not much, but certainly blood. The young man with the limp? He recalled hearing sirens.

He thought of phoning the police, but rejected the idea. He wanted no troop of policemen tramping about the park, not until Sheba's cubbing was over. The slightest unnatural movement, sudden sound, unknown voice could wreck everything.

If the boy *were* a fugitive, he would remain quiet, unobtrusive. Krueger frowned and drove on. Perhaps he was letting his mind run away, but in a zoo you become so conscious of a spot or two of blood, of the trouble it could mean inside a cage, that you never see it without translating those blots into a dangerous possibility.

The limping young man was not in sight as he drove down the road into the canyon.

The small, open amphitheater where the trained seals performed each afternoon was empty. Slowly, painfully, Dandy Fornos made his way among the tiers of seats until he was out of sight from the rim of the bowl. There he sat upon a step, stretching his left leg stiffly before him. The pain blossomed up from

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the calf and shook his whole body. Every nerve was still taut with the near thing, the real. Not yet twenty, slight of build and dark, he would have been handsome except for his eyes which were like those of the lean gray wolf in the canyon below.

He set the briefcase down beside him. *What a lousy price for Ronny and Joe, for the wrecked car and the dead cop;* for the hurt pulsing through him only a slow pace behind the beat of his heart.

Dandy found his handkerchief and carefully pulled up his left trouser leg. He thought about the car which had nearly run him down, of it being parked before the zoo. *If she were here!*

A sudden, hard thump hit the rail at the top of the amphitheater behind his back. Dandy swung around, his hand sliding under his coat.

The big blue peacock settled on the rail, arched its neck, tilted its head from one side to the other and examined him with beady eyes before it stretched a striped wing to peck unconcernedly at a loose feather.

Dandy Fornos swore. He would have to get out of this damned fishbowl.

Shirley Duffy glanced at her watch. It was almost a quarter till eleven. Tom had said ten. So often she had had to wait for Tom in these hidden places, but not after today. This was to be the end of that sort of thing. Tom had promised.

Down the line, the shabby young man who had preceded her into the zoo was leaning against the rail and smiling. Something in that particular monkey cage was amusing him. She was glad he was happy even for a moment. He had looked so beaten, so nondescript. Now that he was smiling, he was almost attractive. Of course, he could not be handsome, not with his scalp shining through his thinning hair. Tom had a wonderful head of hair, dark, just beginning to fleck with gray, perfectly groomed. Tom was distinguished. Women looked at Tom Connors and envied her. Men liked him. Tom should have been in the diplomatic corps, but he had been waiting for her—in spite of the mistake of his marriage. Shirley sighed and it was almost like the pleasure of his touch.

The man in the shabby flannels laughed aloud. It was so unexpected that Shirley strolled down the line of cages to see what had caused his good humor. The sign on the cage front read:

DIANA MONKEY
(*Cercopithecus diana roloway*)
West Africa

Behind the steel mesh, a dark,

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triangular-faced monkey with a black Vandyke and a snowy chest was meticulously examining a scrawny baby. The little old man looked so much like a proud grandfather inspecting his first grandson that Shirley smiled, too. A female monkey beside the pair chattered nervously while three others watched in attitudes of bright expectancy.

"Mama's worrying about Gramp," Shirley said.

When she spoke, the man turned. "Yes," he said, "isn't she?" Most of the good humor fled his face.

"I'm sorry," Shirley said tartly, "I didn't mean to intrude."

"Please, you didn't. Believe me . . ."

"Ah, there you are."

They both turned and Shirley exclaimed, "Tom!" She ran to the handsome, middle-aged man, her hands extended.

Allen Trask returned to the cage full of Diana monkeys. There were no complicatons in monkeys, only a full-of-lifeness, only an entertainment.

Down in the canyon, Sheba was moaning; it was low and full-bodied and almost human. Crouched in a corner behind the tall rear wall of the cat grotto, almost out of sight, Krueger, Pete the keeper, and Doctor Chapman the veterinarian, watched and listened. Krueger had parked his car and walked down to join the two men.

Gently, almost secure in her time of pain, the tigress began to work at the tenuous sheath surrounding the first of her newborn.

"Sheba," Pete called softly, "Sheba, Sheba-girl." It was as though there were a communion between the keeper and the cat. Dr. Chapman raised a warning finger. Then he saw that the cat had heard and was not afraid. There was nothing about this in all the books he had ever read on veterinary medicine—except where house pets were concerned, of course—but this was a tiger, savage, neurotic and unpredictable.

"Sheba," the stocky keeper chanted, "Sheba, Sheba," and the miracle in the cave went on.

It went on without Sultan, for the big male Amurian tiger was in a strange place. Yesterday morning, after a full day of fasting, he had been trapped in a carrying cage pushed against the rear door of the grotto where he had spent five years with Sheba, and moved to a circus wagon which stood in the OFF LIMITS area on the side of the hill above.

For more than a day and a night now, he had carried his ears flat against the golden orange velvet of

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his mammoth skull, his tail twitching at the slightest sound, and the snarl in his throat was a constant anger. All the tameness of his captivity was gone, all the security, as he paced the narrow cage, feeling strength in the steel-spring quiet of his footsteps and the coil of muscles beneath the black and gold of his shoulders.

It was an old cage on wheels, a cage that had rattled and rumbled across the country a hundred times and more. With plumed horses before it, it had paraded the streets from Portland, Oregon, to Portland, Maine, from 'Frisco to St. Augustine. A great hulk of teak and iron and oak, of peeling gilt and shining memories, Krueger had bought it for the zoo when a shoestring circus had folded in town. No one had thought it would not hold a tiger.

"Strongest cage I ever seen," Pete had said. Nor had anyone doubted or even taken the time to look closely at all the bolts and nuts and hinges.

A peahen came out of the bush before the cage and paused to peck at a tuft of weed. Behind her, swift and driving, came a male. When he discovered they were in the open, the peacock halted his plunging run, fanned his tail rigid and forced upward the spectacular three-quarter circle of his train, a shimmering arch of green and blue. His bulky body quivered, and the stiff quills of his feathers rattled.

The drab peahen paid him no attention.

Sultan did. Flat on his belly, his eyes shaded to black and light slits, the tiger felt his muscles grow with tension. The tip of his tail beat like a metronome.

The peacock continued to strut and shake and bow with quick, vibrant, excited movements.

Suddenly, the alchemy of his rage and his instincts becoming one overwhelming wave, Sultan charged. He was three feet off the floor when he hit the heavy bars of the cage door. The tremendous impact knocked him flat.

The birds fled.

Through the somber furnace of his eyes, Sultan saw the door at the end of the cage swing open, smashed from the rusted hinge bolts of almost a century, to dangle by the new lock and hasp. As softly as a domestic cat going down an alley in the night, the great Amurian tiger slipped from the cage and vanished beneath a bloom of white oleanders.

Nor was Sultan the only one who had gone into hiding.

Under the luxuriant leaf-fall of a weeping willow, Dandy Fornos lay with his head on his briefcase

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to wait out the interminable hours of daylight. In the seclusion of his green bower, Dandy had opened the briefcase and counted its contents. Twenty grand and some odd green. What a hell of a poor haul that would have been to split three ways. Tonight he would cross the wires on some car, some little, unnoticeable car, before one of the big apartments off Twelfth Avenue and head south —not directly to Tijauna, but on a road that angled east from Chula Vista, farther east than the tall, barbed border fence extended. There was a girl in the *Midnight Cabaret* who would put him up, take care of him. His left leg throbbed steadily.

On the bench beyond the last long droop of willow boughs were a man and a girl—the girl who had been behind the wheel of the coupe that had almost driven him down. He did not worry anymore about her. This chick had troubles of her own. Foolish troubles, silly troubles, but they helped pass the time. Dandy cocked his head and listened.

"But I feel like such a fool!" Shirley said. Her voice was cold, and hurt, and trembling a little. "No more than a cheap affair. I'm no more than a tramp! A tramp!"

"Shirley, Shirley." The dapper man with flecks of gray in his hair held to her hand and stroked it gently. "Surely you understand it is better to do these things without a scene, without unnecessary noise and confusion. You know how I hate scenes!"

She pulled herself together, her hair still shining in the sunlight that filtered through the tall gray trees, her eyes suspiciously puffy as though she had been crying.

"After all," Tom said evenly, "there is my wife, Helen, to be considered."

"Helen," Shirley repeated after him. "Helen!"

For three years it had been Helen. *From that very first not-quite-innocent luncheon there always had been Helen*, Shirley thought. Once, she had believed, *If not me, then some other, some other who might hurt him.* From her safe, sacrosanct cubbyhole beside the vice president's office, she had looked down the line of desks to Accounting, and Tom, so sweet, so vulnerable . . . He did have such hell at home —so many times he had told her.

"Helen," Shirley repeated aloud, breaking the spell of her lost enchantment.

"After all," he said uneasily, "she is my wife."

"I know. I know. I know. I know." She began to cry.

This was the nuts, Dandy Fornos thought, *better than TV, better than the movies. What a racket this joe had had.* He almost forgot the throb in his leg, the ache that was reaching

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up through his thigh like a knife.

Allen Trask had not meant to see her again. The zoo was a big place. He had let the girl go to her tryst. Now, coming down the canyon road from the opposite direction, he was running into her again, her with tears on her face, her and that sleek bum. Resolutely, he turned his back and stared into the lion pit:

LION
Panthera leo
Africa

The big lion lolled in the mid-morning sun. His shaggy mane was thick and dark and ragged at the edges as though it needed a good brushing. He did not look fierce. In fact, Allen Trask smiled, he looked more like the *Cowardly Lion of Oz*. In spite of the girl, the zoo had been good to Allen. It had taken him back before Anne, before that awful night; it had taken him back to himself.

Only now the girl was here once more, and though he had smiled at the lion, he could feel the tears shining on her cheeks. What good were tears? *You should not brood so much, Allen*, Dr. Bruce had said. *It isn't natural.* Then, a month or two ago, *Do you mind if I suggest another doctor?*

The lion yawned. Allen watched, unseeing.

He had taken the card Dr. Bruce had scribbled and gone up a flight of stairs in the Professional Building, turned right, gone down the long corridor and stood before the door. Like the signs here in the zoo:

Dr. Anthony B. Connors
PhD., MD.
Psychiatrist

He had not gone through the door. He wasn't insane. It was only that he must pay for the accident. *One way or another you paid for everything you did in this life.* And he was paying. God knew he was paying—God, and Anne!

Shirley whispered, "You're cheating us, Tom. You're cheating all of us. You, Helen, me . . ."

"Shirley!" The man was rubbing his hands together.

For cripe's sake, Dandy Fornos thought. The pain in his leg made his muscles jerk. Uncomfortably, he rearranged himself, turned his head from the couple on the bench and gazed into the terrifying black, orange and white mask of a living tiger.

Allen Trask walked on to the sign that read: AMURIAN TIGERS. No cats were in sight, and he did not notice the group across the way.

On the other side of the empty grotto, Krueger whispered excit-

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edly, "That's her fourth, that should be the lot of them!"

The veterinarian nodded, grinning. Impulsively, the keeper squeezed the elbow of his boss. Krueger smiled. Inside the cave, Sheba began to work on the thin envelope surrounding the furry, squirming weight of her fourth-born.

Sultan knew that he had come home. With that driving, constant instinct which is the birthright of every cat, Sultan had found his way back to the grotto. And now, under the leafy bower that led toward his mate, lay this human being exuding the scent of fear. Sultan bared his fangs and snarled.

Dandy Fornos scrambled backwards, his hand sliding under his coat, the briefcase left behind.

"Tiger!" he screamed. "Tiger!"

He came around the bench running, paying no attention to the ramming pain of every pounding stride. Tom Connors saw the tiger, and ran ahead of the boy, leaving Shirley. She stood before the bench, seeing the soft velvet of black and gold through a tracery of shadows, seeing the great yellow eyes with their bright shining centers as the big cat crept forward. She was unable to move, unable to take a step.

Then a man's body crashed into hers, knocking her down, covering her. She tried to struggle.

"For the love of heaven, be still," he whispered hoarsely.

She could feel the fear consuming his slender body, and beyond the fear, the courage that held him there, the two of them one and together on the other side of a flimsy wooden bench from the creeping tiger.

Sultan sprang, following the runners, pursuing the moving enemy who had come between him and his own.

Dandy Fornos, rocking unevenly on his bad leg, turned his head and saw the tiger coming, one seven-league leap and then another. He knew where the next would be. Instantly, Dandy swung and stood steady, the big automatic bucking as he squeezed the trigger. The last shot was almost in the tiger's throat. They died together, each with the same wild, desperate valor.

Then Allen Travers came to his feet and went down the road to see if there were anything he could do. Tom Connors stood beyond all of them, wiping his brow, while Shirley pulled herself unsteadily onto the bench and watched.

At the first shot, Sheba had risen from her litter. At the second, she had gone snarling into the open air of the grotto beyond her cave. Before the third explosion, the last, Dr. Chapman had pulled the lever that let the steel grate slide

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down to separate Sheba from her cubs.

It was all over finally. What was left of the boy and the tiger were removed from the canyon, the briefcase was found, the questions asked, Shirley's elegant Tom disappearing before the interrogation. Dr. Chapman and Pete removed the cubs, carrying them all in a wicker basket, incubator babies now.

Left alone, Shirley Duffy and Allen Trask walked up a path shady with trees, each a stranger not so much to each other as to themselves.

"Why did you do it?" she asked.

He shrugged. "It was the only way."

"But you ran toward the tiger." Her brown eyes regarded him soberly.

"You were there. If I could knock you down, if the cat jumped the bench . . ." He let it go.

"The others were running," she said.

"I thought of that," he admitted, "but so was I, and if the cat had to take somebody . . ."

She reached then and touched his hand. "You were willing?"

"It would not have made much difference. For a long time, it wouldn't have made much difference."

Still, she thought, *it was for me he did it.* "Will you take me home?" she asked.

"I don't have a car."

"I do."

"I haven't driven for a long time," Allen said.

"I can drive."

"No," he said, "you shouldn't."

They turned and retraced their steps toward the entrance to the zoo. As they strolled, Allen began to talk, starting slowly at first, and then letting the words spill like waters loosed from a dam.

Shirley took his hand finally and held it in her own. There was fear there, all his nerves screaming from the fingertips, but beyond that was the courage—and the pent-up longing of a man who had been in the prison of his own soul. Shirley still held his hand as they went out the gate.

Krueger saw them go from the glass pane in his office door. *Well, now*, he thought. *Well, now, and what do you make of that?* But he had no time to make anything of it. Zoos are too busy for that sort of thing.

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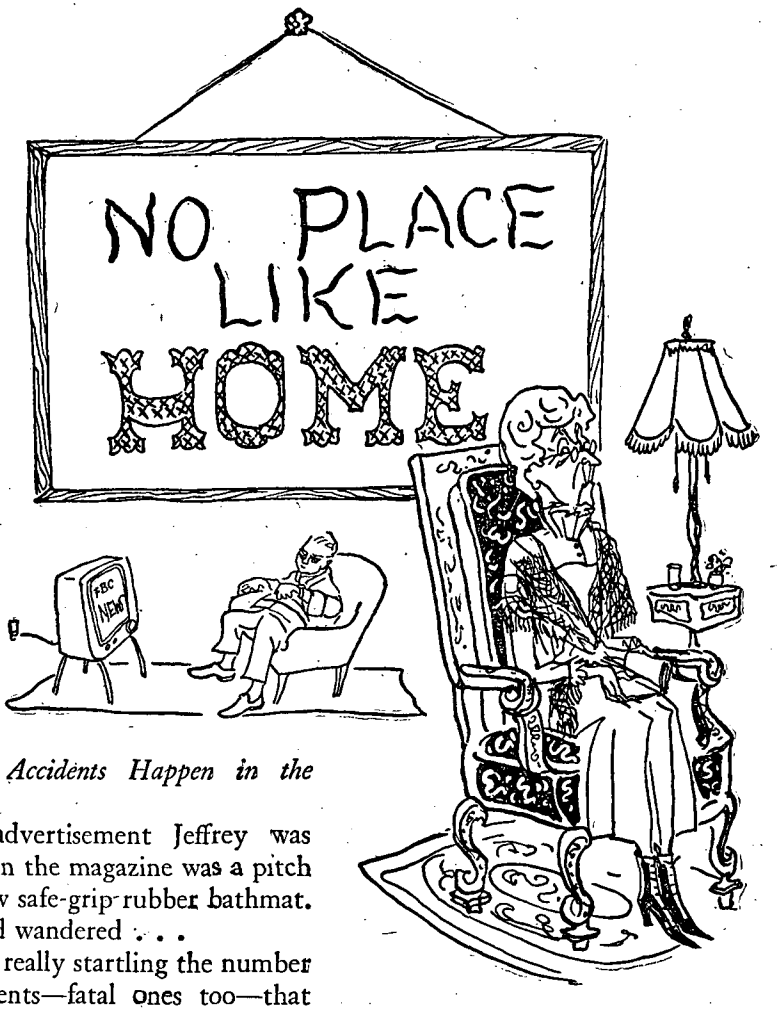
Rewards may come to those who wait, but occasionally patience ultimately reaches its point of combustion.



MOST *Accidents Happen in the Home.*

The advertisement Jeffrey was reading in the magazine was a pitch for a new safe-grip rubber bathmat. His mind wandered . . .

It was really startling the number of accidents—fatal ones too—that

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happened every year in America's homes. And, as the ad implied, the number of fatalities that occurred in bathtubs was staggering. Jeffrey was well read on such matters because he enjoyed vital statistics.

Pity that his grandmother never took a stand-up shower. The best she would do was a once-a-week warm tub.

His porcine eyes narrowed and he pursed his pouty mouth as he covertly contemplated his eighty-one year old grandmother sitting stiff and straight in her Louis XIV chair across the room. There she sat, as prim as an old stick in lace-edged russet brown, a gown that had gone out of style at the end of World War I.

Twenty years he had lived with her, had answered her beck and call, waited on her hand and foot, satisfied her every crotchety whim. Silly old witch. But rich—so very rich.

Of course statistics revealed that many people drowned in bathtubs; many *old* people. Their dicky hearts gave out and they simply slumped in the water in a comatose state. But as far as Jeffrey knew there was nothing wrong with his grandmother's heart. *Hmm.* So that would necessitate holding the skinny old stick under water.

By Robert Edmond Alter

A shudder of revulsion ran through him. He had absolutely no inclination for physical contact of any sort with another human. Being as he was totally asexual, he had never even had an atavistic yearning for a female.

Jeffrey liked money. But Jeffrey didn't have any. Jeffrey's grandmother had it all.

He steepled his pudgy fingers and placed them under his double chin, raptly staring at the old lady. Yes, there she sat with her silly little French poetry book which he knew she didn't know how to read, stubbornly waiting for him to turn on the TV set so she could continue to sit there for another five minutes and convey to him by her devastating stony silence her complete disapproval of such *bourgeoisie* pleasures.

She had only relented and bought him the set after he had pleaded with her—actually *cried* on a few occasions—for two full years. She had never let him forget it since.

Jeffrey looked at the mantel clock. It was time for his 8:30 news. He got up from his chair like a thief, feeling his grandmother's censorious agate eyes on him. She cleared her throat—a sound like the movement

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of heavy wooden boxes on a cement floor—and Jeffrey winced. They followed this grim pattern every night.

He clicked on the TV and slunk back to his chair, avoiding his grandmother's iron-eyed stare. She sighed heavily, martyrishly.

Jeffrey wanted to scream. She often made him want to scream his outrage and frustration, but he never did. He had learned to live with it. He had to; he didn't know how to earn a living on his own, nor did he want to.

Jeffrey liked to listen to the news, especially the detailed reports on current violence. Murder, rape, any form of mayhem gave him vicarious pleasure. The outside world, what little secondhand knowledge he had of it, was evidently a very savage place. A pity his grandmother hadn't stepped out of the house in over ten years.

"An unknown elderly woman," the briskly speaking newscaster said on the ghostly screen, "was today found murdered in the basement of her Westend rooming house. An axe was . . ."

There, that was the sort of news Jeffrey enjoyed. An elderly woman, a dingy basement, a bloody axe . . .

His grandmother snorted through her pinched nose, snapped her book shut and stood up. "Well, I've certainly had enough of *that* for one night," she announced, and gave her fat grandchild a long, defiant glare.

It never failed. She invariably interrupted what he was trying to hear with her clacky voice, but at least she would leave him in peace now. He worked up his fixed, practiced smile.

"Going to bed now, Grandma?"

She sniffed. "Well, I hope, Jeffrey, you don't expect me to listen to any more of that nonsense."

Always the same words, the same pronounced sentiment. He retained his sick smile. "All right, Grandma. Sleep tight."

"At least I shan't go to sleep with *that* sort of trash on my mind!" Always had to have the last word.

"No, Grandma. Good night."

She hobbled out of the library, moving with her peculiar stop-and-go bird walk. Jeffrey let out his breath, slumping in his armchair. Such a relief!

His interest strayed from the broadcasting screen and he looked absently around at the dim, quiet room. The paneling was decorous Jacobean and the wooden chairs and table looked as though they had come from the baronial hall of a medieval robber baron. The bookshelves were ribbed with morocco-bound editions of Dickens, Scott, Reade and Eliot.

Jeffrey left his chair and went to

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the fluted pine mantel over the Georgian fireplace to get his pipe. His grandmother would not allow him to smoke it while she was up and around. "A disgusting, filthy habit," was one of her favorite reiterations.

He loved this quiet, bookish room, loved this old house that had the slightly rundown atmosphere of baroque tradition which appealed to his peculiar nature. He would have loved it a great deal more if it were entirely his to enjoy in moneyed solitude. If his grandmother were gone . . . if she were dead.

"A conflagration today claimed the life of an elderly man at one-oh-five West Poppy. George Towne, age seventy, retired carpenter, evidently fell asleep while smoking in bed . . ."

Jeffrey stared at his unlit pipe. An elderly person smoking in bed; a typical home accident that occurred every day. His grandmother, of course, would sooner slash her wrists than put nicotine to her lips. But who knew that besides himself? Nobody.

He snapped off the TV and began to pace the carpet, to think, to gnaw at the inspiration the way a dog worries a tasty bone. Instead of smoking, his grandmother read in bed each night—some dry archaic thing in English which she could understand—and she was always sound asleep by ten. So if he waited until, say, eleven-thirty, she would be as deeply in the Land of Nod as Morpheus. She would never know what had happened. No one would, not actually. Only Jeffrey.

He smiled as he paced, and looked at his pipe again. Obviously that wouldn't do. But there was no problem. He had an old pack of cigarettes in his room, one that he had bought before he decided to smoke a pipe.

Jeffrey grinned and looked at the clock. Time had somehow expended itself as if it were in a hurry to reach a decisive moment. It was nearly time for his 11:30 news, but he decided to forego that pleasure for the night. Tonight he was going to create his own news—that is to say, his grandmother was.

Jeffrey passed through the vast empty foyer and went to the upper floor, going tiptoe along the corridor. Mustn't disturb his grandmother.

In his room he put one of the cigarettes in his mouth and lighted it, getting a hot glow going on the end. The dry old thing tasted like a newspaper that had been left out in the sun for a month. He started to *hack hack* and slapped a hasty hand to his mouth to stifle his cough.

He waddled blimpishly down the

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corridor to his grandmother's door, and listened. Not a sound; quiet as a grave. His smile was tremulous. He took another drag on the cigarette to keep the tip good and hot, and turned the door handle.

His grandmother's bedstand lamp was on. It was only a 40 watt bulb and it shed a wan, sulfurous light. The penurious old lady was asleep in her bed with her book open in her lap. Good. He would leave everything just as it was. Elderly woman; smoking and reading in bed; fell asleep. Tragic, very tragic.

He edged up to the bed, took a last drag on the cigarette, then stooped over to select a fold in the coverlet near her right hand. His hands were trembling badly. A sticky sweat broke out over his fat body and he thought he was going to be sick to his stomach.

All at once he had the feeling that his grandmother was watching him. No. He wouldn't let himself think it. It was only his distraught imagination. If the irascible old termagant had seen him, she would have sat right up in bed and started to yell at him. He knew her too well.

He placed the smoking cigarette just so in the fold of the coverlet. Then, every fat ounce on his body aquiver, he made a hasty departure from the silent room, returned to his own room and undressed, got into his pajamas and prepared himself to wait. It wouldn't be too bad, really, because he had been waiting for years.

It was a beautiful fire. It made a ruin of his grandmother's room before the fire department could get it under control. Jeffrey had given it a good headstart. He hadn't phoned for help until the smoke upstairs was so stifling he couldn't stand it.

"I was asleep," he told the policeman, wagging his plump hands with nervous excitement. "I don't know what woke me, but I smelled smoke. When I tried to go to my grandmother's room it was already in flames!"

"I had better give him something," the intern from the ambulance said in a rapid mutter to the officer. "He's coming apart at the seams. You boys can question him tomorrow, huh? Come along, sir. It's all right now. I'll take care of you."

Jeffrey allowed the intern to turn him away. Then he stopped to call over his shoulder to the officer.

"She smoked in bed, you know. I guess she fell asleep, poor old soul."

A Sergeant Bix and another plainclothesman called on Jeffrey late in the afternoon. A squad of men had

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been combing the charred rubble upstairs all day, but now they were gone and Jeffrey was ready to enjoy his 5:30 news in peace when the detectives arrived.

Jeffrey was still in a mild state of nerves. He poured himself a glass of his grandmother's Madeira; the two detectives said no, thank you, they were on duty. Sergeant Bix stood by the fluted pine mantel, alternately thrusting out and drawing in his lower lip. The other man sat down with a notebook and pen on his lap. Jeffrey sat too, in his grandmother's Louis XIV chair.

"I understand from what you told the officer last night, Mr. Davenport, that your grandmother smoked in bed," Sergeant Bix said.

"Yes," Jeffrey said eagerly. "I'm afraid she did, poor dear."

Sergeant Bix smiled wryly. "Hard to picture, isn't it—a little old lady of eighty-one smoking cigarettes?"

"Well, of course she did it in secrecy, Sergeant. I don't imagine anyone except myself knew she smoked. A very proper old lady, my grandmother."

"Yes, I dare say." The sergeant frowned at the carpet. "However, it would help to substantiate the exact nature of the accident if someone besides yourself knew that she had a habit of smoking in bed."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Jeffrey said. "How would that help?"

"What I mean to say, Mr. Davenport, is that as yet we haven't turned up any proof that she *was* smoking in bed last night. There's no evidence of matches or cigarettes in your grandmother's room."

Jeffrey pursed his mouth. "Well, but such a conflagration as that would probably burn up any matches or cigarettes, wouldn't it?"

"Probably. But as I say, if we at least had the remains of her cigarette, then our report could positively state—"

"Well, but I saw her," Jeffrey said.

The sergeant looked at him brightly. "You saw your grandmother smoking in bed last night?"

"Certainly. I looked in on her just before I turned in myself. She was reading and smoking in bed. Poor thing, she must have dozed off right after that." Jeffrey's fat face looked crestfallen.

"That's fine, sir," Sergeant Bix said. "I mean to say, it clarifies the matter as long as we have a witness. Can you give us an idea of what time that might have been—when you last saw her?"

"Certainly," Jeffrey said promptly. "I went upstairs right after the 11:30 news. I always watch the late news on TV. So that would make it at exactly 11:45, or a minute or two after."

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"Good. You looked in on your grandmother at, let's say 11:46, and she was reading and smoking in bed?"

"Right."

"You said goodnight to her, and then went to bed yourself?"

"Right."

"And you woke up at two a.m., smelled smoke, discovered the fire and turned in the alarm. Right?"

"Exactly."

"Fine." Sergeant Bix rubbed his hands together. "That should wind it up nicely. Now if you'll just put your signature to the statement Detective Warren has taken down, Mr. Davenport."

Jeffrey signed his name and Sergeant Bix took the statement from him. He scanned it rapidly, rubbing his lower lip back and forth on his upper, then he looked at Jeffrey and said, "I must warn you now, Mr. Davenport, that anything you say may be used as evidence against you."

Jeffrey stared at him. "Beg pardon?"

"I am charging you with the attempted murder of your grandmother, Mr. Jeffrey Davenport."

Jeffrey blinked at him. "I don't understand."

"It was that smoking in bed that smelled wrong to us, Mr. Davenport. For one thing, there's no evidence of an ashtray in your grandmother's room. Seems odd, doesn't it? You can see why our suspicions were naturally aroused."

Jeffrey rubbed at his moist face with a shaky hand. "Well, but I fail to see that it *proves* anything—anything against *me*. So what if you can't find an ashtray? Maybe it melted in the fire, or—"

"You're quite right, Mr. Davenport. It doesn't prove a thing. The evidence we have against you is in your signed statement."

Jeffrey said, "Huh?"

"You just now stated that you saw your grandmother reading and smoking in bed at 11:46 p.m."

"Yes. So?"

"So the coroner's report disagrees with that statement by two hours and forty-six minutes, Mr. Davenport. Your grandmother died at nine p.m. Seems she had a dicky heart."

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It's somehow quite fittin' that from "a pretty kettle of fish" emerge the ingredients for justice.

THE BLUE MAN

By Wenzell Brown

THERE's a heap o' folk around Cripple's Bend as swears that Syd Tyson was the meanest man as ever lived in Pisquaticook County. Mebbe so and mebbe not. All I got to say is that in the whole thirty-three years I been sheriff in these parts I never run across no one quite so stingy and spiteful as Syd.

Warn't no good reason for it I could see. Syd's folks owned a right tidy farm about fifteen miles out along the Mill Road. It was good

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land for truck farmin' and the Tysons done all right by themselves. I ain't a-claimin' that Syd's paw warn't on the near side. He was tightfisted and tight-lipped but he never gave nobody no trouble.

Syd was a different kettle o' fish altogether. Ever since he was knee high to a chipmunk, he was in hot water. Let the other kids rag him a bit and he'd come after 'em with a baseball bat. In school he'd just sit dumb and glowerin', not speakin' a word most o' the time. The funny part about it was that Syd could be right pleasin' when he put his mind to it. That was the time to watch out for him 'cause he never wasted a smile or a passin' word unless he had some trick up his sleeve he was waitin' to pull.

Syd was a well set-up lad, with black hair, big brown eyes, and a dark, broodin' sort o' good looks, but there warn't a girl within fifty miles o' Cripple's Bend that would date with him. Not when they remembered how he'd slapped Sally Masters' face at the church picnic, or the way he'd broken the back of Willy Hooper's hound because the pooch had taken a nip at the cuff of his pants.

When the old folks died, Syd inherited the farm and, like I said, it was a nice piece o' property for a man who could run it right. Syd had the know-how but he'd rather let the place fall to rack and ruin than to put a penny into sprucin' it up. Even the chickens run around loose, all peaked and scrawny like they hadn't had a square meal since the day they was born.

Seems like Syd was even mean to himself. There warn't an ounce o' fat on his carcass, his cheeks was all scooped out, and like as not he'd be wearin' clothes that warn't fit to stuff a ragbag. Nobody had much truck with Syd. His house was set well back from the road and his land posted with no trespassin' signs. Like as not if anyone came up to pay a sociable call, Syd would come out on the porch with his shotgun in his hand and warn 'em off.

It must be twelve years now, goin' on thirteen, since Syd got all dolled up in his Sunday best and made a trip out o' Cripple's Bend. He was gone nigh onto a week. Nobody paid much attention when he left but as soon as he was back, the whole town was buzzin' with the news that he'd gone and got himself hitched while he was away.

Millie Tyson warn't no prize as far as looks go, her best feature bein' her nice rosy complexion. Other than that, she was on the plump side, with a dumpy figure, mouse-colored hair, a loose, full mouth and big, round eyes that always made her look like she was ready to bust into tears. Mebbe she

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was too. Life with Syd warn't likely to be no bed of roses.

Nobody had much chance to talk to Millie. Syd kept her cooped up on the farm and wouldn't let her come into Cripple's Bend even for Saturday night shoppin'. Two or three times some of the womenfolk tried to call on her but they didn't get far. Syd made it clear the *no welcome* sign was still out, and Millie was so scared that, even if Syd was away, she'd beg them to leave.

Of course Maw had to get into the act. Maw says she ain't nosy. But, bein' as how she's the sheriff's wife, she don't want to be taken by surprise by not knowin' what's goin' on around her. Besides she was collectin' for the Community Chest and she don't see why Syd Tyson shouldn't give a donation.

So one day she takes the car and drives out to the Mill Road and smack up into the Tyson back yard without as much as a by your leave. Millie comes to the screen door. She don't unlatch it and she sort o' cringes behind it. She's lost a lot o' weight since she's come to Cripple's Bend. Her skin has turned an ashen color and her eyes are bigger'n ever.

Maw waltzes up on the porch and peers in. She makes believe she don't see nothin' queer in the way Millie's actin' and goes straight into her spiel about collectin' money.

Millie hears her out. Then she says, "I'd like to give something. I really would. But I wouldn't dare. Syd would be so mad, I don't know what he'd do."

Maw says, "I'm sorry. I reckon I shouldn't have come here. I sure don't want to make trouble for you with Syd."

She really means it and I guess that gets through to Millie because when Maw turns to leave, Millie calls out, "Wait."

Millie unlatches the door and beckons for Maw to follow. They go into a kitchen that's spic and span. Without a word, Millie climbs up on a stepladder and lifts the lid off a flour tin on a high shelf. She rummages around inside and when she comes down, she's holdin' a half dollar and two quarters in her palm. She hands them over to Maw and says, "Will that do?"

Maw nods, and Millie says real quick, "Syd mustn't find out. I think he'd kill me if he knew. But it's my own money. I saved it before we were married."

Maw says, "He won't learn from me. You can bet on that."

Millie's breath is comin' hard and she's all trembly but she tries to smile. "Syd's in town and won't be back for a spell. I could make us a cup o' tea."

Maw manages to keep quiet till the steamin' cups are on the table,

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which is doin' pretty well for her. Then she goes to work to pry Millie's secrets out of her.

As stories go, Millie's don't amount to much. She's lived all her life in the country north of St. Onge, near the Canadian line. Her mother died when she was still in her teens, and from then on Millie's done nothin' but take care of her ailin' father. When he passed on, she was left alone with a nest egg of a few thousand dollars and not a friend in the world. She'd always wanted to get married but she reckons it's too late. Then one day her eye lights on an ad for a lonely hearts club in the back of a magazine. She's shy about answerin' but, after all, what's she stand to lose? That's how she come to meet Syd. And now that she's burned her bridges by marryin' him she rues the day she ever seen that ad.

"What about the nest egg?" Maw asks.

"I signed it over to Syd. What else could I do?"

Maw don't get no chance to answer that. Suddenly the screen door slams at her back and Syd Tyson looms up in the doorway. He must have seen Maw's car in the drive and stopped beneath the willers by the gate and walked the rest of the way along the grass to take her by surprise.

He don't say a word, just stands there, his eyes bulgin' and the blood darkenin' his face, makin' it look meaner than ever.

Millie whispers, "Please go—quick."

Maw gets up but Syd blocks her path. "You ain't welcome here.

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Not now. Not never. Is that plain?"

"Plain enough, Syd Tyson. Now clear out o' my way."

Syd stands aside and Maw sweeps past him. She can hear Millie a-sobbin' in back of her but there ain't a thing she can do without makin' matters worse.

It ain't till the followin' spring that I have any words with Syd Tyson.

To my surprise he comes a-stridin' into my office one day in the early afternoon. He raises his clenched hand almost like he was shakin' his fist at me. "Sheriff I want you to arrest a man for trespass."

Syd ain't the kind o' feller to come runnin' to the law for help. I sit there gogglin' at him and wonderin' what tricks he's up to. Finally I says, "Who?"

"I don't know his name, but I can describe him. He ought to be easy enough to find."

I try to keep my voice mild. "Trespass ain't much of an offense, Syd. I ain't goin' to round up no posse to look for him."

Syd snarls, "Mebbe you better. He threatened my wife's life."

That's the first I ever hear of the Blue Man. Syd's right about one thing. Such a man ought to be easy to find.

Accordin' to Syd, he's seen the Blue Man hangin' around the Mill Road near his farm a couple o' times. He ain't no local but a city slicker type. He's tall, close to six foot, and everything about him is blue. He's got blue eyes and is wearin' a blue serge suit. His shirt's light blue with a dark blue tie. Even the band of his summer-weight hat is blue and he's got blue veins in his nose.

I jot down the description on a pad. Syd stands spraddle-legged on the opposite side of my desk, glarin' at me. He says, "You better grab this guy quick."

"You say as he's been molestin' Millie?"

"That ain't what I said. He's been threatenin' her."

"Somebody she used to know?"

Syd shrugs. "She claims as how she's never laid eyes on him till he shows up in the back yard. But I ain't so sure. Millie could be lyin'."

"Just what did he do?"

"He must have waited around till he seen me headin' into town. Then he moseys up to the kitchen door and bangs on the screen till Millie shows up. He says he's goin' to kill her, break her neck or some such thing. Then Millie starts screamin' and he goes away, mumblin' he'll be back and next time he'll fix her good."

"So you leave her alone to come into town and tell me about it?"

Syd's eyes shift. "What else could

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I do? You know I ain't got no phone. I don't go in for new-fangled contraptions like that."

"You could have gone down the road to the Brodericks and phoned from there."

"You're talkin' like a fool, Sheriff. Me and old man Broderick ain't been on speakin' terms for years. He wouldn't as much as let me in the house."

"What about Millie? Seein' as how you're so worried about her, how come you didn't bring her along?"

Syd looks genuinely shocked. "With a stranger about! I couldn't do that. He's like to steal everything he can lay his hands on."

That sounds like Syd, thinkin' more about his property than his wife. I warn't puttin' much stock in his story but at that moment I come close to believin' him.

I hoist myself to my feet. "I reckon I better go out and have a few words with Millie."

"You won't get nothin' out o' her. She's so scared she's bawlin' her fool head off. Anyway I told you all there is to know."

"Just the same, I'm comin' out to the farm. I ain't goin' to catch no Blue Man, warmin' up the seat o' this here chair."

To my surprise, Syd acts real docile. He says in tones that's gentle for him, "That's fine, Sheriff. But don't expect too much of Millie. She ain't too bright, you know."

I take the county car and trail Syd out along the Mill Road. A couple o' times I think I'll pass him but Syd don't take kindly to the idea. His battered second-hand car wouldn't win no beauty prize but it's got a lot o' power under its hood. I got it in my mind Syd ain't too anxious for me to have a chance to question Millie alone.

Millie's been cryin' all right. Her eyes is all swollen and her cheeks streaked with red. She gives me the same story as Syd, but every now and then she flicks a look at her husband as if to ask if she's doin' all right.

When she's through, I says, "This man was all in blue. What about his hair? Was that blue too?"

Millie sort o' gasps and her eyes slide toward Syd, as if implorin' him for help. "Everything's blue," she mutters.

"You dang fool!" Syd chokes out. "He was wearin' a hat. You didn't see his hair."

"He was wearin' a hat," Millie repeats. Then she starts blubberin' and swings around and lumbers toward the house.

Syd squares off at me. "What are you tryin' to do, Sheriff, gettin' her all upset again? Ain't she had a bad enough scare without your bullraggin' her?"

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"You're mighty considerate all of a sudden," I says.

"I ain't aimin' to have her kilt, that's all. You start lookin' for the man. I'll tend to Millie."

I do plenty o' searchin' for the Blue Man but there ain't another soul in Cripple's Bend as has much as caught a glimpse of him. I keep on askin' but pretty soon they're makin' wisecracks in Gimpy's Diner whenever I show up there. You know the kind: "You caught up with the Blue Man yet, Sheriff? Sounds to me like mebbe he come from Mars."

I go to the Tyson place again to question Millie when Syd's out in the field. She's scareder'n ever but she's got her story down pat. And once she's run through it, she won't change a word. I keep at her, though I hate it, with her tremblin' and on the edge o' tears all the time.

Finally I says, "Millie, I want the truth. You're holdin' back on me and I want to know why."

She looks at me and opens her mouth and for a second I think she's goin' to come through. Then her eyes grow bigger and rounder than ever, and I turn to see Syd Tyson prowlin' around the corner of the house and I know I ain't goin' to get no more out o' Millie. Not that day anyhow.

I'm on my way back to Cripple's Bend when Rex Broderick hails me. He's Syd's next door neighbor though, like Syd said, they don't have no truck with each other. I've talked with Rex earlier and he's scoffed at the idea of the Blue Man. "A feller like that would stick out like a camel on Main Street. Mebbe Syd has really gone off the rails and is seein' spooks, or mebbe he's up to more of his tricks. But there ain't no Blue Man. I'll lay you dollars to doughnuts on that."

But today he's singin' a different tune. He's got the wind up almost as bad as Syd. Seems the last couple o' nights he and his wife, Effie, have got the idea they're bein' spied on. Rex slides out on the back porch quick and sees a figure disappear into the shadows of the woods. He hollers, but there ain't no answer. He just catches a glimpse o' the man, enough to know he's tall and thin. Of course he could have been Syd, but Rex don't think so. Syd ain't one to go skulkin' around. He's always got a swagger to him.

Anyway there's another part to the story. An hour or so before he seen me, Rex decides to go scoutin' around down in the woods. He goes as far as the crick that divides his land from Syd's, and the first thing he stumbles across is the ashes of a fire. Layin' around is a litter o' cans, beans and coffee and such.

Rex leads me through the cuttin' toward the crick. There ain't no

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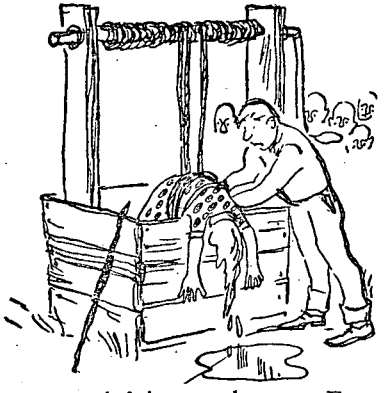
denyin' that it looks like somebody's been campin' out there. I root around a bit in the bushes and find a crude lean-to made o' pine boughs, with the huckleberry bushes crushed down beside it, like a man's been sleepin' there. So mebbe I'm wrong, after all. Mebbe the Blue Man's real, though it's hard to see him roughin' it in a blue serge suit.

Then everybody in Cripple's Bend, even the summer folks,



starts cuttin' in on the act. Every time anyone spies a shadow at night, they root me out o' bed and swear as how they seen the Blue Man.

That's the way things go for a month or more. Then one day around noon I'm in Gimpy's Diner polishin' off a stack o' flapjacks when Syd Tyson comes poundin' in. He grabs me by the shoulder and spins me around so I'm lookin' straight up into his face. His eyes is blazin' and his lips are workin' but he's slurrin' the words together so I can't hardly make them out.

"You stupid nincompoop!" he yells. "I been tellin' you and tellin' you, but you sit there shovin' food into your fat face and doin' nothin'. Now he's got Millie."

"Who has?"

"The Blue Man, you idiot. He's clubbed her and thrown her down the well."

I reckon the less I say the better, so I walk out and get into the county car and let Syd lead the way along the Mill Road toward his farm. Pretty soon there's another car falls in behind us, and then another, till there's a whole procession.

We rig up ropes and haul Millie out o' the well. Ain't no doubt she's dead, or that she was kilt before she hit the water. The whole back of her head is stove in. The murderer didn't even bother about concealin' the weapon. It's a rusted metal fence post and it's lyin' square up against the pump.

By the time we lay Millie out on the ground, there's at least twenty men and boys in the rough circle that's formed around the well. They're all mutterin' about the Blue Man, and then Syd Tyson's voice is raised above the rest. He's swearin' a steady streak and tellin' the men to fan out and start scourin' the woods. The Blue Man can't be far away.

The next day I call in the State

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Police and they come with bloodhounds but it ain't no use. If there'd been a trail, it's been trampled all over. There ain't a trace of the Blue Man neither. The fence post ain't got no fingerprints on it, and most anyone could have dug it up. Murder's been done but it looks like the killer's got away with it.

Syd Tyson raves and rants about me bein' a hick cop and how Cripple's Bend needs a new sheriff. I know what he's up to. If I try to pin the crime on him he'll yell crooked politics. I'm convinced that he's the killer but I ain't got a shred of evidence to go on. Syd knows it and I can see him sneerin' at me. He's created a legend that's going to live for a long time in Cripple's Bend.

Two years slip by, and then Syd Tyson takes another trip. This time people know he's goin' and they ain't so surprised when he comes back with a second bride. Carol Tyson ain't no mousy creature like Millie was. There's something proud about her that takes your breath away. She's a tall slim girl with straw-colored hair, a ridge of freckles 'cross her nose, and gray-blue eyes that are clear and steady. There's a love o' life in her that even livin' with Syd Tyson can't stifle.

Soon the word is passed around that Syd and Carol is fightin' like cat and dog. Effie Broderick claims as how she can hear 'em going great guns way down to her place. I suspect Effie is doin' a spot of eavesdroppin', but that ain't neither here nor there.

Seems like Syd met Carol through a lonely hearts club, same as he had with Millie. I reckon both of 'em was gildin' the lily in their courtin' letters. Syd was makin' out like he was a gentleman farmer with a big estate, and Carol was pretendin' she had a sizable inheritance tucked away for a rainy day, while the truth of the matter is she was brought up in an orphanage and didn't have a nickle.

Everyone knows the marriage can't last. I'm hopin' Carol will clear out bag and baggage. Standin' up to Syd and shoutin' him down is dangerous because, if I've got him tagged right, he's killed once and is like to try it again.

All the same I ain't prepared for what happens next, a repeat performance. One day Syd comes stridin' into my office with the news that the Blue Man is back and has been threatenin' Carol. Syd yells about me bein' incompetent, and how he wants the state cops in right from the start.

It ain't easy but I hold my temper. Once more we make the trip out to the Tyson farm, with Syd in the lead and me eatin' his dust. Carol runs through her story.

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She don't mumble and stammer like Millie. She speaks straight out. The Blue Man come to her door while Syd was in the fields. He screamed and shouted at her like crazy, makin' all sorts o' threats. But she don't panic. She keeps the door latched and tries to question him. He don't seem to like that and pretty soon he stamped away.

'Taint no time at all before the grapevine carries the news all over the country of the Blue Man's return. Most every day somebody claims to have seen him but, before I can show up on the scene, he's just plain disappeared. I'm turnin' pretty sour on the deal, when I get a phone call from Big Tim Hackett who runs the Temple Fillin' Station a piece down the road. He's excited as all get-out. Seems the Blue Man stopped there for gas, and Tim and his two sons jump him. They got him hog-tied in the gents' room waitin' for me to come and fetch him. The way things turn out, this feller's a salesman from down Portland way. He's wearin' blue all right, even a blue tie and a blue band on his hat. But he's shorter'n average and on the paunchy side. A long distance call to Portland puts him in the clear, and I have to set about unrufflin' his feathers so there won't be no suit for false arrest.

I'm runnin' around in circles, goin' without sleep and gettin' nowhere. I never did believe the Blue Man killed Millie Tyson, but now I ain't so sure. Carol is stickin' to her story, and that don't make no sense if it's a lie.

I have a talk with her when Syd ain't around. One thing's sure, she ain't scared o' Syd and she ain't wastin' no love on him neither.

Finally I lay it straight on the line. "You're fittin' yourself for a coffin, Carol. You can end up just like Millie."

She opens her eyes wide. "Do you think Syd would kill me? Why? I've got no money, nothing for him to inherit." Then her eyes open still wider. "Of course, there's the insurance."

"Insurance!" I yells. "Why the plum-ding-dang didn't you tell me that before?"

Carol relaxes and smiles. "When we were married, me and Syd each took out a policy in the other's name. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"Sure, and it's a perfect setup for murder too. Take my advice, Carol, and scoot out o' Cripple's Bend while you got the chance."

Carol looks thoughtful. "As a law enforcement officer, you're advisin' me to desert my husband. Is that right, Sheriff?"

She's got me stumped and she's laughin' at me. There ain't a word I can say, so I stamp away.

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The end comes quicker'n I expect. Just two days later I get the word there's been another killin' out to the Tyson farm. This time the news is phoned in from Rex Broderick's place. Lew Satchell, who's actin' as my deputy that summer, takes the message. By the time he tracks me down at Gimpy's, it seems like he's managed to tell half the town. I hop into the county car and lead the way along the Mill Road. All the time, I'm cussin' to myself and swearin' Syd Tyson ain't gettin' away with murder a second time.

I head straight for the well, with Lew Satchell at my heels. There's a body in there, sure enough, all jackknifed up, and there's a blood-stained metal fence post propped against the pump just like before. But the body in the well ain't Carol's. It's a man—and I don't have to wait till he's hauled up to recognize him. He's Syd Tyson.

The same crowd is gatherin' as did two years ago, and there's the same mutterin' about the Blue Man. I face the lot of 'em over Syd's corpse, and when they want to form a posse to search the woods I don't raise no objections. I shrug and leave 'em to it.

I didn't expect they'd find no Blue Man, and they didn't. But I got a surprise comin' to me. When I make it down to Broderick's place to question Carol, there's Maw sittin' right beside her and holdin' her hand.

I put Carol through her story half a dozen times. There warn't much to it. She hadn't heard nothin' or seen nothin' out of the way, till she went to the well and found Syd's body. After that, she come straight to the Brodericks and Rex phoned my office.

It was all simple and straightforward, but I don't believe a word of it. Mebbe I could have broke Carol down if Maw hadn't set there, glarin' at me like a mother hen protectin' her lone chick. There warn't a single thing I could find wrong with the story, and neither could the State Police. As Maw kept remindin' me, Syd Tyson had complained about the Blue Man long before Carol had ever met him, so nobody could accuse her of making him up. Besides there was plenty o' people around Cripple's Bend who'd claimed to have seen the Blue Man at one time or other and, even if none of 'em was too reliable, their testimony was mighty hard to refute.

So I goes through the motions of lookin' for the Blue Man all over again and, like before, I get nowhere. I'm pretty sure I know what happened. Carol Tyson learned that Syd was plannin' to kill her and had turned the tables on him, beatin' him to the gong. But there's

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one snag to my theory. Doc Smedley, the coroner, tells me a man must have done the killin'. It was a hard blow that had split Syd's skull. Even at her best, Doc didn't think Carol would have the strength for it and, at the time, he was treatin' her for a sprained wrist. Doc was prepared to go on the stand and swear she was unable to strike the heavy blow and then trundle Syd's body into the well.

Months go by and Carol's livin' all alone in the Tyson place. She's got her money from the insurance company that amounts to four thousand with the double indemnity clause. Syd died without no will, but there ain't no relatives to dispute that the place is hers.

Around Easter, Carol has a visitor, a feller named Larry Cutts. Actually Larry's stayin' with the Brodericks so there won't be no loose talk, but he's helpin' Carol fix up the farm. In no time flat the place begins to look alive again, with a fresh coat of paint on the house and whitewash on the barn.

I do some checkin' on Larry, which ain't hard because he volunteers most of the answers before I ask the questions. He'd known Carol from way back when they were kids together in the orphanage. They'd always been sweet on each other but Larry wouldn't ask her to marry him, not till he could give her a home and security, and the best job he can get is part-time work in the cannery over to Glover's Bay. So Carol tires of waitin' for him and up and marries Syd. That's the last he's seen of her till he decides to look her up a few weeks ago.

I ask Larry if he was workin' the day Syd Tyson was killed. He shrugs. That's a long time ago and he can't remember, but the cannery has a time-clock. Why don't I check the records? I do just that; drivin' down to Glover's Bay the next day. I learn that Larry's taken sick leave the day Syd died, but he's been seen late that same night in Jerry's Pool Hall. He's wearin' a muffler around his neck and complainin' about a sore throat, but he ain't too sick to shoot a couple o' games.

I time the drive back and forth to Glover's Bay. Larry could have made the trip, dumped Syd in the well, and shown up at the poolroom. The timin' was tight but it warn't impossible.

I reckon I have a case against Larry Cutts but I decide to try it out on Maw first.

Maw sits knittin' all the while she's listenin' to me. I can't tell a thing from her face, but when I'm through she says, "Larry ain't the Blue Man."

That's true enough. Larry Cutts is medium of height and no one

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would call him thin. He's broad-shouldered and stocky. 'Course anyone can wear a blue suit, but Larry's dark-complected, with eyes like ripe olives. There just ain't nothin' blue about him.

I sigh. "I thought I made it clear there warn't no Blue Man. Syd Tyson made him up as a cover to kill Millie."

Maw gets a stupid look on her face. "Then how come that the Blue Man turns around and kills Syd?"

I start gettin' hot under the collar. But the more I yell and try to explain, the more mixed up I get.

Finally I realize Maw's mockin' me. She don't believe in the Blue Man no more than I do, but she ain't goin' to admit it. She says, "Mebbe you're right, Paw. But who's goin' to believe you? Syd Tyson invented his own killer and he didn't create him in the image of Larry Cutts."

I see her point all right. After all the fuss about the Blue Man, there ain't no jury in these parts will convict Larry and Carol of killin' Syd Tyson. I think it over for a while and decide I'd best leave matters alone and not start meddlin'. As things stand there's a justice of sorts.

Since then, Larry and Carol has got married and they've a couple o' young uns. The old Tyson place is prosperin', and there ain't a young couple nowhere around who's better liked than the Cutts.

As for the Blue Man, he ain't exactly been forgotten, but nobody in Cripple's Bend has seen hair nor hide of him since the day Syd Tyson died.

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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

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Learning being a daily process, one's proficiency does not necessarily preclude the likelihood of further education.

"May I help you?" asked the shapely young girl. She was blonde and full-lipped, the lips now parted in a friendly smile that showed an even row of teeth, and she was leaning slightly forward over the display case in Gloves and Purses in such a manner as to present a hint of further charms.

Bradley Jones, which wasn't his real name, smiled back. "No," he

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said, "unless you can help me find the friends I am supposed to meet here."

"I'm sorry," she said, with the same friendly smile, "but I'm afraid I can't be of much help there."

Bradley summoned up a bit of charm. "Thanks, anyway. It's nice to find friends, especially *new* ones," he added meaningfully, and saw that the point was not entirely lost on her. He turned away then and sauntered down the aisle toward Cosmetics and Perfumes, a low whistle of appreciation scarcely audible on his thin lips.

Bradley was a small man of medium height, and the clothing he wore was of nondescript gray. Among the women shoppers in the department store, he looked precisely like a bored husband who had momentarily lost track of his wife —which was exactly how Bradley Jones wanted it to look.

He turned right at Cosmetics and Perfumes, paused a moment, and let his glance drift about as if in search of someone. He saw her then, standing by the jewelry display. She was tall and thin-faced, and was wearing a short coat of yellow. He saw her eyes dart warily about for an instant, and he knew exactly what she was going to do even before he saw her hand close over the brooch of costume jewelry and transfer it unobtrusively to the pocket of her coat. He knew the type. It was his business to know the type. Her next move would be toward the nearest door.

Bradley went through the door a scant few seconds ahead of her and fell into step beside her as she turned down the street. After ten or fifteen paces, she glanced nervously toward him.

"Lady," he said, "I believe you have something in your pocket that doesn't rightfully belong to you."

She faltered in her stride, and her face went chalk-white beneath its makeup.

"If you'll just step to the side of the building here, we'll have a little talk," he told her.

She stopped in front of a window filled with mannequins clad in bathing suits, and turned to face him, her eyes downcast and her jaws clamped tightly in trembling fear—which was exactly the way Bradley Jones wanted it.

"You seem to be a decent and respectable lady," he said, "and I definitely hate to think of having to take you back into the store with me. Although the crime of shoplifting is not a great one, there can be a certain amount of distasteful publicity . . ."

"Please," she said, scarcely able to force words from between quivering lips. "I have a husband, two children . . ."

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"I'm sorry. But you should have thought of that."

"Here!" she said, reaching quickly into her pocket. "Take the brooch back! It really isn't worth anything. Please!"

Bradley raised a protesting hand. "It is not quite that simple," he said, keeping his voice at a conversational level so as not to attract attention from passersby. "If your crime goes unpunished, it might only induce you to repeat the offense."

She raised her eyes slowly, and looked pleadingly into his for an instant. Then she fumbled quickly in her purse and brought forth a bill. "Take this!" she said. "Please!"

"Well . . ." There was hesitation in his voice, but the hand that took the ten dollar bill from her showed not the slightest trace of pause. ". . . all right. But remember this," he said, tucking the bill into the pocket of his coat. "Crime *does not pay!*" It was his own private little joke. He liked the humor of it.

"Thanks!" she said, and turned hurriedly away.

Bradley could never quite understand why some women who seemed socially and financially well off should stoop to petty thievery. Probably most of them didn't even use the junk they took. Professional shoplifting he could understand; there was a tangible objective to it, a valid reason. But this petty pilfering was quite beyond him. Perhaps the fear of getting caught gave them some kind of secret thrill, and when he apprehended them, the thrill reached its culmination—the thing they had been seeking all along. He didn't know. Really, he didn't care. He shrugged. Strange how at least fifty percent of them always thanked him when he took their money.

He strolled leisurely down the street. Yes, it was a good life. A different town every week, a different girl in every town . . .

Thoughts of the blonde in Gloves and Purses came suddenly to the fore. Better try to make contact there, do a little promoting. Once the recreation for the week was assured, he could go about his business untroubled. She seemed to be a bit on the young side, but —so what?

He rounded the corner, quickened his pace, and went back into the store by a different entrance. As he approached Gloves and Purses, he saw that the blonde was busy with a customer, a young woman with red hair, red shoes, and a red purse. He paused abruptly by Ties, his instincts aroused. His practiced eye knew the type.

He didn't have long to wait. The blonde turned away from the dis-

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play case to search for something in the boxes on the shelf behind her, and several pairs of expensive-looking gloves disappeared swiftly into the maw of the red purse.

Bradley grinned. This one was not an amateur. This one was piling up expensive loot with a definite objective in view. A pro!

He considered stepping forward immediately and exposing the theft —that would put him in good with

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the blonde, give him a grand approach—but he dismissed the thought almost as soon as it had entered his head. The blonde hadn't caught sight of him yet, and there was no sense in placing pleasure before business. The blonde could wait; she'd be there when he wanted her.

Bradley turned away and, without seeming to hurry, hurried to the nearest exit. In most cases, the pros were easier than the amateurs. Most of them had police records, and to be caught plying their trade could easily land them in big trouble. Of course, there was a matter of ethics involved; in some circles, the shaking down of one pro by another was definitely frowned upon. But Bradley gave no thought to ethics; you could neither eat nor drink them.

Less than two minutes later, he and the redhead were facing each other on the street in front of a window display of camping equipment.

"You look like a decent and respectable lady," he had just finished saying, "and I definitely hate to think of having to take you back into the store . . ."

"Look, you!" she warned. "Lay off or I'll call a cop!" Her face had paled, but her green eyes were flashing angry defiance.

"Under the circumstances," he said easily, "I wouldn't advise you to call a cop or to create any kind of scene. After all, *you* have committed the crime—not *I*!" It was nice to put them into a snug little corner like that.

"Why, you—" She broke off, her eyes little more than narrow slits. She looked as if she were about to take his face apart any moment with her sharp nails. "All right!" she snapped, getting herself under control with an effort. "All right! How much?"

"Considering the value of the merchandise involved, I think twenty dollars should be about right." He was pouring it on, making her like it.

She fumbled into her purse, extracted two tens and thrust them at him, unladylike words hissing from between her tight lips. Then she spun on her heel and went clicking away down the street.

In spite of occasional moments with tough customers like the redhead, there were several gratifying facets to Bradley's profession. There was very little danger of being arrested for his activities; the victims could not afford to scream copper. Whatever money he made —and he made plenty—was his own, no tax bite. He did his banking in his own hip pocket. That way there was no record of deposits, no record of interest being paid

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him, nothing for the federal boys to sink their teeth into. There was no danger of running out of customers; they were in every large town he cared to visit. According to some late statistics he had read, some metropolitan areas were being shoplifted to the tune of $50,000 per week. Best of all, he was his own boss. He could work when he wanted to, quit when he liked. At the present moment, he was considering a little vacation in Mexico.

Thoughts of Mexico brought to mind again the little blonde in Gloves and Purses. Maybe she would be a good companion. He would have to look into the situation, but not at present. He had already been in the store three times that morning and had made three marks for a cool $40. Best to ply his trade elsewhere for a while and come back sometime in the afternoon.

By four-thirty he had made four more marks for a ten-spot each and was sauntering leisurely down the aisle toward Gloves and Purses. The blonde caught sight of him as he approached, and recognition flashed into her eyes.

"Hello," she said. "Find your friends yet?"

He shook his head, leaned an elbow on the display case, and tried to let his disappointment show. "No, they must have forgotten me. Now it seems I'll be stuck with another lonely evening."

"Yes," she said sympathetically, "I know just what you mean."

He looked at her, and her hand went suddenly to her mouth in embarrassment. "Oh!" she gasped. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

They both laughed.

"Well, maybe we could solve a problem for both of us by sharing the evening," he suggested.

"Oh, I don't know about that—" A tiny frown crept across her forehead.

"At least we could have dinner together," he urged.

"Well—" She hesitated. "Well, I suppose there—there wouldn't be any harm . . ."

"Fine!" he said, hurriedly. "I'll pick you up at seven, if you'll tell me where you live."

Her frown deepened. "Better not pick me up at home," she said. "I'll explain later. How about the corner of Tenth and Main?"

"Wonderful!" he said. "Until seven, then."

Bradley walked out of the store with a feeling of conquest. The day had progressed quite to his satisfaction, and there were reasons to believe the night might hold even greater satisfactions. He felt so good about the whole thing that he walked across town and made

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another shakedown before the stores closed.

That night, at her direction they drove northward for nearly an hour, then turned into the parking lot of a cottage-like structure bearing the neon name *Cozy Inn*.

Except for the glowing bar along one wall, the place was mellow with shaded lights. A cluster of tables filled most of the floor space, and there were secluded booths along two of the walls. She went directly to one of the booths, and he ordered two martinis.

During the drive from town he had learned a few basic things about her. She had graduated from high school a couple of years ago and had worked in stores ever since. She was living alone with her mother who was very strict with her—which was why she hadn't wanted him to call for her at her home—and her name was Terra Wilson.

Before the arrival of the second round of martinis, Bradley had given her a brief, and highly mythical, account of his recent life as a traveling salesman and his desire to settle down, after, of course, a short vacation in Mexico. During dinner, he extolled the virtues of Mexico as a vacationland, a land of sunshine and gaiety, a land of romance.

"It must truly be a marvelous place," she said wistfully. He didn't know whether the lights that danced in her eyes were made of star dust or whether the liquor she had drunk was catching up with her. Maybe a little of both.

"It is!" he agreed. "It has everything! But—" He paused and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, it would be a lot more fun for *two* than just *one*."

Yet even as he gave her the left-handed invitation, he knew suddenly that he had no intention of taking her along. Mexico had its own full share of beautiful women, and there was certainly no point in taking along a type of commodity that already existed there in abundance. But it was a good gimmick; it might serve to keep her stringing along with him for the week he intended to be in town.

"I've always wanted to go to Mexico," she sighed, "but of course I've never had the chance."

He almost felt sorry for her—but not quite.

Her hand was warm and vibrant in his upon the table, and he gave it a sudden, reassuring squeeze. "Let's go somewhere," he suggested, "so we can—talk about it."

"Oh, I couldn't do that!" she said, quickly freeing her hand. "I—I hardly know you."

He captured her hand again. "But this is no place to discuss the wonders of Old Mexico!" he urged.

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"Romantic places should be discussed in romantic settings, and there is a beautiful moon tonight." He felt her hand begin to relax again, and he hurried to press home his point. "I'm a stranger here," he said, "but you probably know of some little place where we could go and—and just sit and talk."

"Well," she said reluctantly, "there is a little place a few miles from here, a sort of little park. But—"

"Fine!" he said, rapidly shutting off any further protests.

The road meandered through a wooded area and became scarcely more than an indefinite lane. They passed one car parked near a sheltering clump of bushes, and then he guided his own convertible into a little glade that was bathed in moonlight.

He cut the ignition and lights, turned quickly toward her, and gathered her into his arms. Her full lips were cold and distant at first, but suddenly he felt them grow warm and responsive to his own—*eager* was the word for it.

After a moment, she pushed him back and away from her. "There—there's a little lake over there," she whispered, almost breathlessly, "and a sandy beach . . ."

He scrambled quickly out of the car and around to her side, and swung open the door. Her shapely legs flashed toward him as she turned to get out. She paused, and he saw her gaze shift to a point just beyond him.

He wheeled quickly, and his mouth fell open. It was incredible! Striding directly toward him was the redhead! She was not wearing red shoes now or carrying a red purse in her hand; she was wearing dark shoes, and in her hand, glinting malevolently in the moonlight, was a nickel-plated revolver, its stubby snout pointed directly at his breast bone. Fear washed through him, leaving him momentarily limp as he remembered the intense anger that had burned in her green eyes that very morning.

"Raise your hands real slow-like," she commanded. "No quick moves. I know how to use this."

The way she said it left no doubt in his mind. As if on their own accord, his arms began reaching slowly upward. "You—you wouldn't dare," he gulped. "There is a car parked near here . . ."

"Don't concern yourself with it," she snapped. "It's mine. How else do you think I got here?"

He moistened his lips. "I'll—I'll gladly give you your money back."

"There's more involved than just the twenty dollars," she said, stepping directly in front of him, the gun never wavering. "Turn around."

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He hesitated. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the little blonde. She hadn't moved from the car, and he guessed he could not expect any immediate help from that quarter. Maybe the redhead wouldn't go so far as to kill him but, on the other hand, a couple of slugs placed in almost any area of his anatomy could certainly slow him down for a long time to come. He turned around.

Yes, he had been right. She was a pro. He could tell by the way she flipped the billfold from his hip pocket in one easy motion. He groaned. At last count, there had been twenty tax-free five-hundred-dollar bills there. The result of a full year's effort! He turned slowly to face her again.

"Maybe—maybe we could work together," he suggested, trying to calculate the exact distance between himself and the hand that held the gun.

"You're not the trustworthy type," she said. "You're unethical. We had a good thing going until you stuck your nose into things. We could have juggled the records for at least another month before a merchandise inventory began to catch up with us. Now we don't feel safe anymore."

She folded the bills into a neat little bundle with her left hand and began to tuck them down into the front of her blouse, her eyes straying from his for a brief instant.

He went into action. His right hand suddenly swept down to clasp the hand that held the gun. His fingers clamped hers into immobility and began twisting the weapon from her grasp.

Then a dull *klunk* at the back of his head exploded his brain into a shower of writhing lights. It dropped him to a sitting position on the grass where he was only dimly conscious of the blonde returning a spike-heeled shoe to a shapely foot.

"Well, where now, little sister?" he heard the redhead ask.

Little sister! In spite of his dazed condition, several things became startlingly clear.

"How about Mexico?" he heard the little blonde say as they strolled away. "I hear it's simply an adorable place to spend a vacation!"

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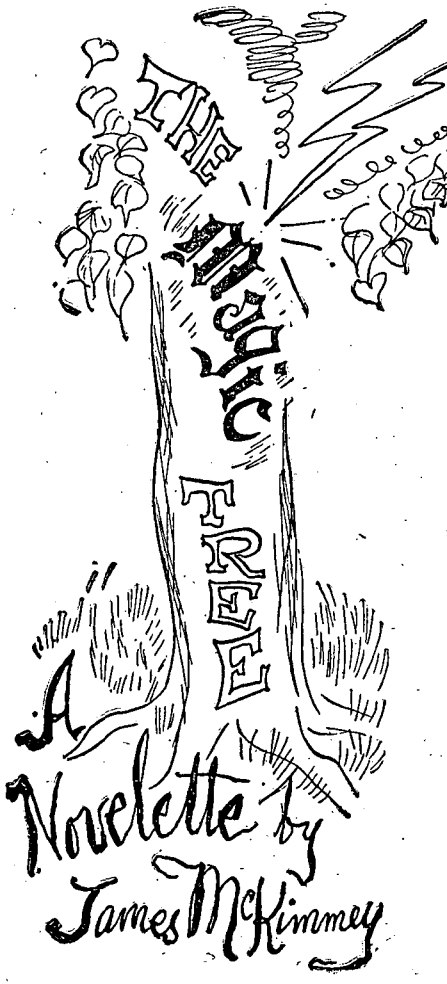
It is comfortable to believe that when a living thing dies, that is the end of it; contrarily, it may be only the beginning of its melioration.



WEARING bleached overalls and a faded red T-shirt, George sat beside the old round oak table in the kitchen, wishing that his father had never brought her home to the farm. She was standing beside the ancient fuel stove which one pumped with a palm held against the air vent at the end of the red round handle in order to build up pressure to give blue flame to the burners. George had done the pumping that morning, and been proud of it, but she hadn't even thanked him. He watched her scratching at a large iron skillet with a spatula, her plump young body flexing beneath a thin house dress. The way her body looked had interested him, and he'd examined it pretty well when he was certain nobody noticed, although he didn't really understand why watching her made him feel so strange—he didn't like her at all.

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A searing wind was coming off the plains through the screen door, even though the sun had just risen. George looked at his father mopping his lined, weathered face with a large bandanna. His father's right arm was in a cast, supported by a white sling. He had fallen down in slippery mud in the hog pen and broken the arm, but in town a lot of the fellows had laughed, and kept asking his father what kind of night he'd spent with Jocy, whom he'd married the day before in the Methodist Church, where George had stood during the ceremony wearing his father's seersucker suit, a yellow bow tie and a white shirt. George had kept telling them that his father hadn't broken his arm during the night, but in the hog pen that morning. They didn't seem to listen, and kept laughing, and George could not figure that out.

His father, an aging man turned gaunt by hard labor, picked up a silver knife and pointed it at him, saying in a raspy monotone, "Put your napkin in your collar, boy, or you'll spill all over yourself."

"Yes, sir," George said. He picked up a large napkin and stuffed one corner under the T-shirt.

Jocy, his father's new wife, turned around and carried the skillet to the table with a sullen expression. She scraped eggs onto his father's plate, then a mound onto George's.

George eagerly picked up a fork and tasted his portion, then made a face. "They taste funny."

"Well, they're burnt," his father said.

The girl straightened indignantly, her pretty face void of animation, her bare arms and legs pink and smooth. "He's always complaining."

"It's true," his father said. "They're burnt."

"Can't learn everything all at once," the girl said. "Isn't any reason for him complaining all the time."

"He's just a boy."

"He's twenty-three years old," the girl said. "He needs a good whipping, like I got at home."

"You don't ever lay a hand on him."

The girl's face tightened with anger, then softened as a tall young man opened the screen door and stepped inside. He had come in from the small quarters built onto the barn, and now he removed a straw hat to expose his thick blond hair, the whiteness of his upper forehead where the hat had protected him against sunshine a startling contrast to his smoothly browned face. He smiled, muscles bulging against tight Levi's and a checked shirt, nodding first to George's father, then to the girl, who smiled self-consciously. "Mornin', every-

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body." He eased into a hard chair.

"Mornin', Tad," George's father said tonelessly.

"Hi, Tad," Jocy said, and hurried back to the stove. "Get your eggs in a minute."

"What do you say, Tad?" George said loudly, and now he felt good. Tad had come to help with the farm after his father had broken his arm, and George had liked him from the beginning. There wasn't anything in the world that Tad didn't know; he was sure of that. Tad always treated him good, smiling and laughing and joking with him, but never mean, like the girl was sometimes.

"How are you this morning, Georgie?" Tad asked.

"Okay."

"Sure, you are! Georgie's a good boy, Mr. Swanson."

Swanson nodded abruptly, and George was certain that he saw a flicker of pleasure in his father's eyes. Still, his voice came out just as toneless and raspy as ever. "I'm running the tractor down to the south acres, Tad. Got some fence fixing to do along the irrigation ditch. You feed them hogs. Get some hay down from the loft to the horse's stall. The pipe running off the windmill's rusting out. There's another in the barn. Find it and put it in for the old one. Tomorrow we're going to start husking."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Swanson. But maybe you better let me take care of that husking by myself."

"I got but one hand to use," his father said, getting up. "But one-handed is some better than a lot I know with two."

"Yes, sir," Tad said. "I believe that. And I'll have Georgie help me with the pipe."

"That's a good idea. Jocy, you gather them eggs. Don't forget."

"Isn't likely I would," she said defensively. "Do it every day."

The farmer took a sweated straw hat from a peg and walked out into the oven heat, ducking as he went through the door because of his spare-framed tallness.

When Tad had finished eating, he said, "You go into the livingroom closet and get your hat, Georgie. The sun'll be too hot for your head, you know."

"Okay," George said, and stood up, round-cheeked and tall, his overalls fitting tightly at the waist. He walked out of the kitchen into the livingroom where it was cooler. His mother, whom he could not remember well because she had died quite a long time ago, had always kept the room closed off, except on fall and winter evenings when they had all come here and sat on the black leather furniture in front of a large red brick fireplace that used up almost half of one wall. She'd

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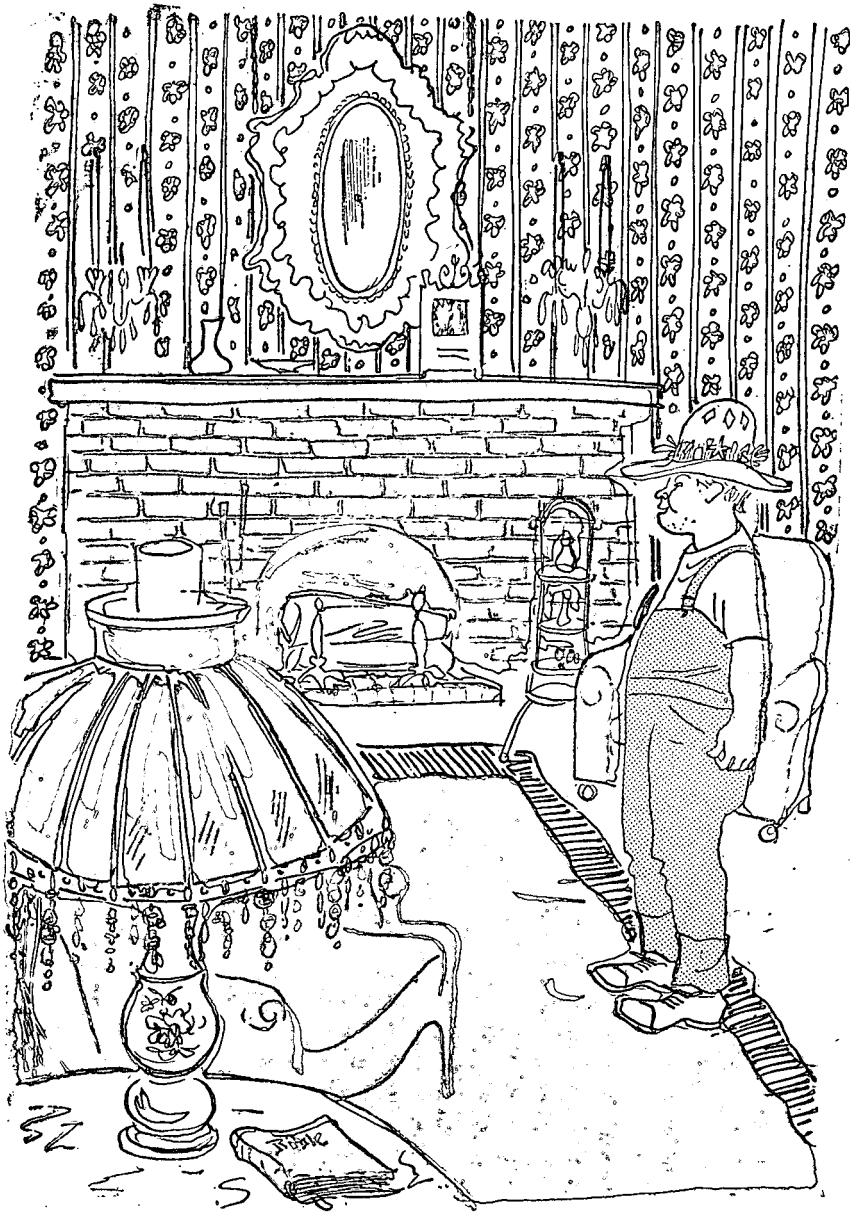

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loved the room. There was a leather-bound Bible on a marble-topped table, and beside the Bible was a vase lamp with a shade made of crimson glass panels. Green felt had been tacked around the bottom of the frame, and from this hung beads of every color. George loved that lamp, and he wished fall would come soon so they could come in here and sit before a fire, with the lamp showing red and the beads reflecting and the flames jumping in yellow brightness and the logs crackling. George loved the entire room, as his mother had. Something deep in his brain made him feel that he had often been with his mother in here; here he was always happy.

He stopped beside a wall with its purple flowered wallpaper and looked at a framed copy of the 23rd Psalm hanging there. George couldn't read, but his father, when they came in here together, always read it to him. Sometimes he could even remember parts of it, like now, ". . . and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." He didn't know exactly what that meant, but the house of the Lord certainly, he knew, must be like this room.

He opened the closet door, took his hat from a shelf, and smoothed a palm fondly over its soft gray felt. He had picked it out in a catalogue five years ago, and his father had sent for it. It had a good, wide brim, with a round crown, where he had cut a number of triangular holes so he could wear it in the summers and it wouldn't be too hot. What was best was the band, where there were attached a half-dozen pretty things: a gold metallic cigar wrapper; a silver star, a metal soldier and a small spear, all from Cracker Jack boxes; a furry yellow casting fly which Mr. Tettman, the town's banker and lawyer, had given him; and a genuine Indian arrowhead scrupulously chipped to perfection from smoky brown flint. His father had helped him fix the items to the band with glue and thread.

Wearing the hat proudly, George opened the door to the kitchen, where he saw Jocy turn from Tad suddenly, cheeks flushed, and begin to rattle pans busily.

"All set, pardner?" Tad asked cheerfully.

"Okay," George answered.

They walked outside into the bright hot sunshine. The old barn stood gray and dilapidated against the white sky, with the silo beyond, and the land running flatly away with the fallow fields and the fields with the dry cornstalks, the husks whispering, as far as the eye could see. The blades of the windmill were turning with a steady rusty

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sound. Chickens in the pen beside the coop, which was attached to the barn, scurried and fluttered crazily. The old horse, Solomon, stood haplessly in his small corral, his back swayed and his eyes tired. George's father had used him for plowing until he'd bought the tractor, his single concession to progress. Hogs slept in the mud of their pen. A faded blue pickup truck took the sun at the start of the dirt road which wound out to the highway.

"You wait by the windmill, Georgie," Tad said. "I'll get that pipe and some tools."

George stood in the sunshine beside the structure of the windmill, where the ailing rusty pipe ran to a metal trough that carried water along to a larger trough in the hog pen.

In a few minutes Tad returned, carrying a pipe and a metal tool box. "Well, Georgie, do you think we can get this fixed?"

"I guess," George said. "Tad? You like Jocy?"

Tad looked at him quickly. "I guess I do. Why, Georgie?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I wish Papa hadn't went and married her."

"Well, but you got to think about your papa, Georgie. If he likes her, then I guess you got to like her too. Like I do."

"I guess."

"That's the way life is, Georgie. You've got to help out with other people, even if you don't feel like it."

"I guess."

"Now this windmill—she's an old-timer, that's for sure. You know what makes her work, Georgie?"

"I guess not."

"There's a well down there. And there're blades up there on top. The wind blows and that makes the blades go 'round. The blades are hooked onto an axis, so you have a wheel that goes around too. That's your power. Power makes the pump go. Then you've got water coming up from the well and going into this here pipe. I wager you got maybe two horsepower with a twenty mile-an-hour wind. But the pipe, now, it's rusting out and leaking. Those pigs over there're likely to dry up and fly away. We can't have that happening, can we, Georgie?"

"Guess not."

Energetically, Tad opened the tool box and got out two wrenches, then went to work unscrewing the pipe from the pump.

"Where'd you come from?" George asked.

"Guess I've been about everywhere, Georgie—Oklahoma, Texas, the Dakotas."

"How come you came here?"

"Just moving along. I stopped in town, and somebody at the co-op

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said your papa busted his arm and needed a hired man. So here I am."

"It's okay with me," George said shyly.

"That's nice to hear, Georgie. Now you tell me a little more about you, while we're fixing up this windmill. What do you like best?"

"My papa, I guess."

"That's right, your papa. What next?"

"My magic tree," George said, smiling.

"You never told me about your magic tree."

"Wouldn't tell nobody before, except my papa. Now I told you."

"Tell me some more, Georgie."

"Well, I seen it a long time ago, out west and south. It was broken at the top and had all kinds of holes and hollows, and my papa, he says it was broken by lightning. He said it was a special kind of tree, on account down comes the lightning, like God was aiming, see? And crack goes the tree, all splintered and broken off. Now it's dead. Papa says that's maybe God's tree. And I said, is it magic? And he says maybe it is, on account God is magic too. That's my magic tree."

Tad paused in his work, his strong hands gripping the wrenches. "I saw that tree, all right. She's a dead cottonwood. So what do you do with it, Georgie?"

"Put things in there—pretty things. It's got all kinds of places, 'specially way down deep."

Tad grinned whitely. "Like a squirrel, huh, Georgie?"

"I don't know. Like my papa."

Tad's blue eyes brightened with greater interest. "Does he go around hiding things too, Georgie?"

"I see him. Hides coffee cans. All over. He never knew I saw him, though, so don't you tell him, Tad."

Tad shook his head gravely. "I wouldn't do that, Georgie. What was in those cans?"

George smiled dreamily. "Nothing pretty like I got hid in my magic tree."

"Well, what have you got in that tree?"

"Some jelly beans, and pretty flowers, and beads, and new pennies, and . . . Oh, everything pretty. God made it magic, see, with the lightning, so everything I ever put in that tree stays just like it was."

Tad smiled tightly. "You ever check that, Georgie?"

George shook his head. "Wouldn't be fair. Ruin it, that way."

"Well, now—those cans your papa hid. He have any money in those cans?"

"Money's not pretty," George said disinterestedly. "Not paper money. Pennies are pretty, if they're new."

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"And jelly beans," Tad said. "You sure you saw your papa hide them cans?"

"Don't tell him."

"I wouldn't, Georgie. Now we just about got this new pipe in and ready, haven't we? As soon as we're done here, maybe you ought to go out and see how that magic tree of yours is doing. Is that a good idea, Georgie?"

George nodded. "Okay."

The tree stood alone in the field,

with dry pale sprigs of prairie grass showing from the sun-hardened earth around it. George ran his hand along the rough, juiceless bark, looking at the jagged top above his head, then at all of the swirls and curls in the wood which created the pockets where he had tucked the pretty things. There was one yawning hole, just eye high, leading to the hollow stump. When you dropped the pretty things into that, you could hear them strike bottom. Once he'd dropped a pretty thing in there, and a squirrel had come flying out of the hole and nearly scared him to death. Then the squirrel had bounded away, and he'd shouted after it to stay away. It had, because this was his tree and even God knew that.

George sat down on the earth with his back resting against the wood so that he was in the shadow it created. He didn't think of very much for quite a time, but just felt content to be here, alone, with his tree. He thought mostly about how precious this tree was, with its lightning-delivered magic, preserving all of the pretty things he had seen and saved and given to it. Finally he got up and ambled back toward the house.

His father had not yet returned on the yellow tractor, so he looked in the kitchen, but Jocy wasn't there. He didn't care about that.

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He walked back and looked at the hogs lying in the mud, seeing that the new pipe was losing no water and the trough in the pen was overflowing. They lay in the mud on one side, and the sun dried the other, so that the mud there had caked and turned the color of putty. "What do you say, pigs?" he said, but none of them woke up to look at him.

He moved on to the small corral where the horse stood. He climbed up on the first rail of the fence and held out his hand, but the horse didn't respond. It stood in statuesque immobility, withers bony, back sagging, tail forlorn, fetlock joints worn and nubbed, hooves cracked. "What do you say, horse?" he said. But Solomon did no more than shiver a shoulder muscle.

Finally he went over to the chicken pen and bent to peer into the coop. Where sunlight flashed in through a sprung roof board, he saw an egg in a nest. "Darn her," he said, knowing that Jocy had not yet gathered the eggs like she was supposed to. Then he stepped into the barn, leaving the door open so that sunlight flowed in from the entrance in a long rectangular pattern across the straw. The smell of chickens was strong here, and the stall where the cow had been milked was empty because she'd died seven months ago. He wished his father would buy another one. A dusty old leather harness was hung on a large nail on the wall, and there was a permanent ladder leading up to the square entrance of the hayloft. He stopped when he heard Jocy's voice up there.

"Now you quit, Tad!"

He stood motionless and listened carefully to Tad's rumbling laughter.

"We can't, Tad!" Jocy said, giggling now. "Don't . . . just stop now . . . he'll be back any minute . . . stop . . ."

And then George couldn't hear them anymore. There was only the soft sighing of the wind moving through the barn and the creaking of it as it shifted its old joists and beams. Finally he heard them moving, and he left the barn quickly. First Tad came out, then Jocy. Tad smiled at him, and Jocy's face colored in the sunlight as she hurried to the chicken pen.

Tad asked, "Did you go out and see that magic tree of yours, pardner?"

George nodded silently, seeing Jocy bending over to pick up eggs from the coop. He felt funny watching the way her hips looked against the thin dress. "Tad?" he said finally.

"What's on your mind, old buddy?"

"What were you and Jocy doing

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up there in the hayloft anyway?"

Tad drew a work-toughened forefinger down from a nostril to a corner of his mouth. He smiled again. "How'd you know about that?"

"Heard her talking and you laughing and her giggling. Such like."

Tad placed a hand gently on his shoulder. Now George's father was in sight, driving the tractor in from the south with one hand. "Tell you what happened, Georgie. One of those crazy hens got itself through the back of the coop and into the barn, and up she went, straight into the hayloft, and it was there she laid her eggs. Would you believe that?"

"Never heard of that," George said honestly.

"Neither did I! But Jocy got worried, on account she might lose some eggs. So I went up there with her to look. We found the hen and the eggs too, and stuck the hen back through, into the coop. Isn't that the craziest, Georgie?"

"Sure is," George nodded.

"Now, don't you tell your papa. You know how he gets if a chicken gets out. Remember how mad he was when that coyote got into the pen and killed five?"

"Boy, he was, wasn't he?"

"Let's not get him mad again, pardner."

"Okay."

Then the tractor was rolling into the barnyard, and Tad was calling out cheerfully, "Hang on there, Mr. Swanson. You got the use of just one hand, don't forget. How'd it go, with that fencing?"

His father and Tad worked hard through the husking, but near the end his father cut himself bad in the leg with the steel hook on his leather husking glove. He lost quite a bit of blood, coming in from the field. But George and Jocy got Tad from where he was working, and Tad drove his father into town in the pickup. The Doc fixed him up and said his father

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was getting accident-próne in his old age. His father had said he was just trying to do a man's work and got going at it too hard. But it slowed him up enough that Tad had to stay on to help out. More times than George could count, that crazy hen got loose from the coop and went up in the loft to lay her eggs, so that Tad and Jocy had to go up there looking for her. George examined that coop pretty carefully, and he couldn't find the places where the hen got through. But Tad told him that was sure enough what happened, and they never told his father about it.

As summer wore on, the Doc took the cast off his father's arm, although he was still limping from the cut in the leg. The nights stayed warm, and sometimes George would get up and go outside to watch the fields and prairie stretching out lighted by the moon, and feel the warm wind on his cheeks. Often he could hear an old coyote howling out there somewhere, but he wasn't scared. His father had shot a coyote once, for killing chickens. He'd come in with it in the back of the pickup truck and thrown it down on the ground beside George's shoes so that blood from the hole in its neck soaked into the dirt. George hadn't liked that at all. The coyote had looked like a dog they'd once had, and he didn't like to think that his father had shot it. He wouldn't speak to his father the rest of the day.

Then it was suddenly fall, and the nights were cooling. It was one morning after a chilly night that he found Tad out near the barn with a rifle, reloading cartridges with gunpowder.

"What do you say, Tad?"

"Well, Georgie, I'm fixing to get that coyote that's been bothering the chickens." He was sitting on an old workbench in the sunshine. A lever-action carbine lay beside him.

"Old coyote don't mean no harm," George said.

"Maybe he doesn't, but he's a mean one, Georgie."

"No coyote ever bothered me."

"You never got close enough, Georgie."

"They'd always run."

"Sure, but if they get you in a corner they can take your face off. Coyote's a predator."

"How?"

"Hunts other animals, and he doesn't care what kind, so long's he can get away with it. He's a rabies carrier too. You get bit by a coyote which has got himself rabies, you go crazy under the sun and die."

George shivered a little, rubbing his nose, but he didn't like to see those cartridges collecting in the greasy cloth sack Tad used to carry

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them, despite Tad's reasoning.

"Soft-noses," Tad said, grinning. "I take up this carbine." He lifted the short-barreled rifle. "I get close enough, I just pump away." He jacked the lever viciously.

Again George shivered, remembering that other coyote his father had thrown at his feet. He hoped Tad would never get close enough to shoot the one that howled nights now somewhere on the prairie, and he left Tad to go out to his magic tree. Carefully, he removed from a pocket the pretty thing he had found that morning out beside the white wooden post supporting the metal mailbox. It was a chrome car-door handle which shone beautifully in the sun, and he guessed maybe it had fallen off the mailman's truck when he stopped to leave the mail the day before. George polished it carefully against his overalls, then dropped it into the large hole and listened for it to hit bottom. When it did, he patted the tree fondly, knowing that it was safe there now, and wandered back to the house.

An old, polished black car was standing in the barnyard beside his father's pickup truck, and George heard voices inside the house. Stopping beside a partially open window, he listened, finally recognizing the voice of old Mr. Tettman, the lawyer and banker, speaking to his father in a pleading tone of voice.

"Well, Henry, it's time you made out a will. It's sensible."

George sat down beneath the window and continued listening.

"Less papers the better," his father rasped, "but I want to see the boy's taken care of."

"We don't like to think of it, Henry. But you broke your arm, and then you cut yourself badly. Things can happen. Are you sure you want everything left to Jocy?"

"She's my wife."

"That's true, Henry, but she's young, you know. We could set up some sort of trust fund. That is, if—"

"She's my wife. I've told her to take care of that boy if something happens to me. She'll do it."

"All I'm trying to say, Henry, is that there are some nice homes for him around the state. He'd be happy in one of them. And I could make a provision to—"

"Don't want that boy in no home. This is what he knows, this farm. It's all he knows. He'd wither up and die in some home like you're talking about. I know him. Jocy'll take care of him. She's my wife, and I've told her."

Mr. Tettman sighed. "All right, Henry. I won't argue with you. But what are you going to leave for Jocy to use, in case such a thing ever happened? You don't use the

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bank, and without protection—"

"Just put it down, all my earthly possessions. That'll include the farm and land and equipment and animals and the metal lock box in the bottom bureau drawer in my bedroom. That's all you have to put down."

"Just as you say, Henry."

George stood up and moved away, suddenly upset and frightened. He didn't understand much about what they had been talking about, but he certainly didn't want to go away somewhere. Not live here? Leave his magic tree?

For solace he again found Tad, who was now working on the tractor. "What do you say, Tad?"

"Well, Georgie, I figure your papa's been using the wrong mixture in this thing. I think that's what's the matter."

"I heard my papa talking in the house to Mr. Tettman—he's the town lawyer and banker."

"That's who he is, all right."

"Yes," George said, and then told Tad everything he'd heard.

Tad stopped work on the tractor and straightened and listened with his eyes very intent. When George had finished, he said, "Well, now, there isn't anything going to happen to your papa, Georgie. Don't you get yourself all upset. He's going to live a hundred years. You won't have to go off somewhere."

George felt good again, sure of things, and he was glad Tad had come to work on the farm. Then, just two days later, his father's left shoulder was broken.

After Tad had driven Mr. Swanson into town, where the Doc put him in a cast and said he would have to stay in the small hospital for at least three days, Tad sat at the kitchen table with Jocy and George and told them just what had happened.

"It was the pulley rope, with the big iron hook on it, attached to the wall of the barn. Henry wanted me to hoist up some hay bales to the loft for the winter. He told me to climb up and release the hook. Well, I did that. He was standing down there on the straw, turned away from me, and that hook just plain give way. It swung down on the end of the rope and whanged into his left shoulder, and that's how he got it busted. Doc says he'll be fine in no time. But it surely proves one thing, and it's what I told everybody in town. A man gets accident-prone, and it doesn't seem like it ever stops."

"Poor Henry," Jocy said, looking at Tad.

"Nothing can hurt my papa too bad," George said bravely.

"That's right, Georgie," Tad said with enthusiasm. "Your old papa is just too tough."

The next morning, when he

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walked across the barnyard, Tad appeared from the barn and said, "Georgie, you didn't see my sack of ammo, did you?"

"Uh-uh," George said.

"I had it there in the barn with the carbine, and its gone."

"I didn't see it."

"Well, your papa maybe picked it up. When he gets back I'll ask him. I wanted a try for that coyote this morning. Wind's down a little, and he might be moving. I'll have to hold up, I guess."

"Okay," George said, and went out to his magic tree where he sat down with his back against the dead trunk and dozed a while, because he hadn't slept much the night before.

Jocy had been restless that night before, and she was again that night too, and the next, but then his father came home and she seemed to relax. George slept better himself, with his father at home. His father couldn't work for quite a time, so he would sit in the livingroom on a black leather chair. Evenings, they would all sit in there, because it was cold enough now to use the fireplace. Tad split wood for it and brought it in.

One night Tad winked at George's father and said, "Got a good supply of wood now, Mr. Swanson, but when we start running out a bit, I was thinking of chopping up that old dead cottonwood out there west and south. That'd make us some good heat in this room."

George's eyes widened, and his face flushed with quick panic. But then his father laughed gently and said, "I think we'd better let that cottonwood be, Tad."

Tad grinned. "Guess you're right, Mr. Swanson."

George was relieved, and was again glad to be in this room his mother had once used and loved, with the purple flowered wallpaper and the framed 23rd Psalm and the fire snapping the logs and the lamp glowing red with beads reflecting. He was getting pretty used to Jocy now, who didn't pick on him much anymore, but mostly ignored him, which was all right with him. Everything was going to be all right forever.

Then, a week later, when his father decided he was able to drive the tractor again, the machine rolled over down the bank of the irrigation ditch along the south acres and crushed his father to death.

It happened sometime in the morning, with the air cool and frost not far off. George had wandered aimlessly about from house to barn to pen to silo. He knew his father had driven off on the tractor, and Tad had argued about his father not being able to handle it. But you couldn't tell his father anything

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like that, and he'd gone. Later, George had looked for Tad and couldn't find him anywhere, so he went out to his magic tree and deposited a new penny his father had given him during breakfast. Then he came back and found Tad busy feeding hay to Solomon.

Tad looked at George, smiling, and said, "'Bout time your papa is getting back, isn't it?"

"I don't know," George said.

"Don't like to see him riding around on that tractor with his shoulder still weak. Maybe I'd better hike over to the south, see how he's doing."

When Tad finally came back he said he'd found Swanson dead in the ditch, with the tractor below him upside down. He was crushed so bad in the head, Tad said, you could hardly recognize him. George did not really understand that his father was dead, but only hurt, like the other times. He wanted to go see him over there, but Tad told Jocy not to let him. She started crying loudly and snapped at him not to leave the house. So he didn't.

Then Tad drove into town and got the Doc and Si Havenger, the undertaker, and they came out with the hearse and went over and got his father and brought him back to the house on a stretcher all covered with blankets so George couldn't see him.

When they lifted him into the hearse, Tad said, shaking his head sadly, "He just got himself so accident-prone there wasn't any chance for him."

George waited patiently for his father to come home. Then he rode into town with Tad and Jocy in the pickup truck for the funeral, which he didn't understand at all. It was held in Si Havenger's small, dark chapel, which smelled so sweetly from flowers placed around the coffin that George felt a bit sick for a time. Some woman George had never seen before sang hymns in an unsteady, reedy voice, and the minister, Reverend Dapple, said a lot of Bible things in a sad voice. Then everybody started walking past the coffin, which was closed. Jocy started crying again.

George said to Tad, who was sitting next to him, "Is Papa in that box?"

"That's where he is, Georgie. But his soul's in heaven."

George stood up and ran past everyone and tried to yank the lid open, but Tad followed him and pulled him off. There was a shocked silence, then George called, "What do you say, Papa!"

Tad got him outside into the pickup, and Jocy came out and got in, still crying, saying, "He likely scared me half to death, trying to get that thing open!"

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Finally the pallbearers carried the casket outside and put it in the back of the hearse, which rolled slowly away. Tad started the pickup and got behind it. They drove in a procession of maybe fifteen cars to the cemetery outside of town where a dry wind blew hard and cold, taking the leaves off the few trees scattered between graves. The minister said some more Bible things, and then they lowered the coffin into the hole that had been dug. When they started shoveling dirt over it, George said definitely, "He's not in that box."

When they got home, George went out to the barn to look for his father. When he couldn't find him, he returned to the kitchen where Jocy and Tad were talking at the table.

"Break the lock and look," Jocy said.

Seeing George, Tad said harshly to Jocy, "You don't touch it."

"But how do we know—"

"How about supper?" Tad snapped.

Angrily, Jocy got up and began banging pots against the stove.

"I was looking for my papa," George said. "I guess he stayed in town. He'll be back tomorrow, that's for sure."

Tad put a hand gently on his shoulder. "If you believe it, pardner, you believe it."

From the sound of it, Jocy was restless all that night. George had trouble sleeping too, wondering when his father would return. Early the next morning he got up and went outside into the chilled air to look for him again. But he couldn't find him. Then Sheriff Gaines drove into the yard.

"What do you say, Sheriff?" George called. He walked over, and the large man put an arm over his shoulders as they walked toward the house.

"Sorry about what happened, George."

"My papa'll be back," George said positively.

The sheriff patted his shoulder, then they went into the kitchen where Tad and Jocy were eating breakfast. Tad started to get up, but the sheriff motioned him down and took a chair himself.

"You wouldn't have a cup of coffee for me, would you, Jocy?"

"Sure would, Sheriff," Jocy said, but she looked very nervous.

"Was talking to Mr. Tettman," the sheriff said. "Seems Henry left a will. All that remains for me is to put it down legal what happened to Henry. You found him, Tad."

"Sure did," Tad nodded gravely. "Never saw a man busted up like that."

"I took a look," the sheriff said. "Took it bad in the back of his

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head. Couldn't 'a been any worse."

"Can't hardly be avoided when you get under a rolling tractor."

"That's true. Where were you when it happened, Jocy?"

"Here in the kitchen," she said, beginning to sniffle.

"You, Tad?"

"I was here all early morning, around the house and barn, then I got worried and went out and looked for him. That's right, isn't it, Georgie?"

George tried to think. He was fairly certain that he'd looked for Tad early that morning and couldn't find him anywhere. But he wasn't sure, and it didn't seem to make any difference anyway. He would be seeing his father again pretty quickly.

"George?" the sheriff asked.

"Guess so."

"Well, then, I'll put it down as accidental. I'll drive back into town and tell Mr. Tettman. Then I imagine he'll be driving out about noon to read you the will, Jocy."

Jocy began crying again. Tad stood up to shake hands with the sheriff.

"What're your plans now, Tad?" the sheriff asked.

"Well, I feel awful sorry for Jocy there. And I sure like old Georgie here. Don't want to leave them bang up against it. Might stay on long enough to see how they can get along with things. Just hope Mr. Swanson might have done all right by them—girl and a boy like Georgie can't run a farm all by themselves."

"Well, Mr. Tettman'll be coming along with that news. I'm glad you're out here to look after things until they're straightened out, Tad. Take care now, Georgie. Everything's going to be all right."

When Mr. Tettman's shiny, black car rolled slowly up from the highway, George was waiting outside. He watched the car carefully to see if his papa would get out. But only Mr. Tettman, a thin man wearing a black suit, his white hair rustling in the cool breeze, stepped out. He saw George and smiled. "Well, there, George. How are you?"

"What do you say, Mr. Tettman?" George shouted.

"Well, I'm feeling pretty good, George." He lifted a slim dark leather briefcase from the back seat and started for the kitchen door.

"You see my papa in town?" George asked.

"My boy," Mr. Tettman said sadly.

George followed him to the door, which was opened by Tad from the inside. Jocy was sitting at the table again, sniffling. She looked at Mr. Tettman with blurred, animal-

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wary eyes, but offered no greeting.

Tad shook hands and said, "Mighty nice of you to drive all the way out, Mr. Tettman. Have a chair."

Mr. Tettman sat down, immaculate with his black tie knotted perfectly against his high starched white collar. "Sheriff Gaines told me you were staying on to help out, Tad. I'm glad to hear that." His white hands trembled, but he managed to get the briefcase opened.

"Least I can do, Mr. Tettman," Tad said, sitting down, watching the old man tensely.

Mr. Tettman drew a paper from the case and put it down on the table. He cleared his throat violently, sniffed deeply, then ran his tongue slowly across his upper false teeth. George noticed the way Tad kept opening and closing his hands on top of the table.

"Now," Mr. Tettman said, "this document, in essence, leaves everything to you, Jocy."

Jocy blinked against her fresh tears and said, "Golly."

Mr. Tettman looked at her, then concentrated again on the paper. "That includes the land, the buildings, the animals, the furniture, everything. Also the contents of a metal lock box which Henry informed me he kept in the bottom bureau drawer of the bedroom that you and he, ah . . ." His voice trailed away. "Do you know the box, Jocy? I have here—" He fumbled into another pocket for quite a time, and at last brought out a small key which he put on the table. "I imagine this might fit the lock. Si Havenger was kind enough to give it to me, from Henry's pocket."

"Sure," Jocy said, and got up to hurry to the bedroom. She came back quickly and placed on the table a metal box locked with a small silver padlock. She had stopped crying now, and she looked with brightening eyes at the box.

"Let's see now," Mr. Tettman said. He tried several times to get the key into the padlock, but it kept falling from his shaking hands.

"You wouldn't want me to do that, would you?" Tad asked. He took the key hastily to open the lock, then pushed the box toward Mr. Tettman.

Mr. Tettman tugged the lid open with great effort. He removed a yellowing photograph of George's mother, looked at it for a time, then handed it to George.

"Boy," George said, looking at it happily.

Next Mr. Tettman removed a guarantee for the tractor. He turned it over carefully, then dropped it to the table. Finally he brought out a folded piece of ruled tablet paper, which had been discolored by time.

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He managed to get it unfolded and examined it with a bewildered expression. On it were drawn five circles and one X. In a lower corner was written: 0——1. He looked in the box again. Tad stood up and looked in the box, now empty, his face coloring. Jocy was blinking again, this time angrily.

"Is that all there is?" she asked in a shrill voice.

Mr. Tettman's head had begun to tremble spasmodically again. "Uhmmmmm," he said, and cleared his throat and ran his tongue along his upper teeth. "I'd hoped so very much that Henry might have . . . I mean, the boy here. I—" He managed to stop the trembling of his head, but not that of his hands. "I was never familiar with Henry's financial situation, of course. I do know he sold land down to the south for the irrigation ditch at what must have been a pretty good price. He always managed to get some pretty good crops. He knew how to live rather cheaply, I believe."

"*Did* he!" Jocy shouted.

Mr. Tettman picked up the paper again, looking bewildered once more. "Some sort of doodling, I imagine. I just . . . well, I'm disappointed, to say the least. I—" He moved his tongue across his teeth again, clutched the table and drew himself upright. "Anything I can do, of course—" He looked apologetically at George, who smiled back at him brightly, then walked to the door and disappeared.

The kitchen seemed very silent to George for a time. Then Jocy said, "That fool! All along, he let me think—"

"Wait a minute!" Tad said, looking at George with wild eyes. "Wait a minute!"

"A picture and a guarantee and some doodling!" Jocy yelled.

"Georgie!" Tad said, getting up and grasping George's arm. "Georgie, you told me he buried cans, remember?"

George shrugged, startled by the hard grip on his arm. "Guess so."

"Those cans—do you remember where he buried them?"

George thought about it, then shook his head. "Guess not."

"What cans?" Jocy shouted.

Tad whirled and picked up the ruled paper. "Just wait a minute!"

"You're getting as crazy as he is!"

"It's a map! He buried his money in cans! This is the map. The X is the house, see? The circles are where he buried the money, and the scale's in the corner!" Tad ran out of the room, and the door crashed behind him.

Confused, George looked at the picture of his mother in his hands. He smiled, knowing what he was going to do with it. He held it out

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toward Jocy. "This is my mama."

"Oh, shut up!"

George walked outside and saw Tad running from the barn carrying a spade in one hand, the paper fluttering in the other. His legs churned, carrying him off toward the north field. George shrugged, then he walked out to his magic tree. There he carefully dropped his mother's picture into the eye-level hole. He sat down then, with his back against the tree, and went to sleep, because he hadn't slept well at all the night before.

He awoke suddenly when Tad, dirty and sweating, his blond hair askew, lifted him to his feet by his overall bib. "Nothing!" Tad shouted. "Where did he bury those cans?"

George looked at him with eyes wide open, feeling his heart pounding in sudden fear. "My papa?"

"Where did he bury those cans?"

George shook his head slowly. "When he comes back—"

"*Where?*"

"Don't remember."

Tad slapped him hard across the mouth, and George tasted blood. He suddenly began to cry, because he'd never been struck before in his life. Tad hit him again, harder, and he fell to his knees, wagging his head, tears and blood streaming down his chin. He looked at Tad imploringly. "I put my mama's picture in the magic tree."

Tad stood spraddle-legged above him, eyes furious, then he turned and ran back toward the barn.

George wiped his hurting mouth with his hand, saw blood on it and cried again, tears stinging. "Papa?" he said.

Then he saw that Tad was driving the tractor back toward him. He began to move away, until Tad jumped off the machine with a large-bladed axe in his hands and swung the blade at the center of the tree. George screamed as though the steel had bit into him. He threw himself at Tad, but Tad knocked him away, striking him in the nose so that he was bleeding there too. The blade of the axe glinted in the cold sunlight as it whipped at the dead trunk again. Rotted jelly beans and rusty, molded silver bits flew out on the ground.

Tad stopped and glared at him wildly. "Remember *yet*, dummy?"

George whimpered and got up again to try to stop him, but Tad drove the butt of the axe handle into his stomach. He gasped and sat down again, clumsily. Through red-rimmed eyes, he saw the top of his precious tree pitch over and crash against the barren ground. Then Tad got a chain from the tractor and looped it around the lower trunk. He jumped onto the tractor and drove it forward. The chain stretched and tightened, the

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tractor held motionless for a moment, straining, then the trunk was ripped from the ground, its dead roots showing whitely.

"*No!*" George whispered, forcing himself to get up. He staggered after the moving tractor, following his tree stump as it bounced along on the end of the chain. He fell down and got up, crying, and Tad kept driving until he reached the house.

"Get a fire going in that living-room, Jocy!" he shouted. "We're going to have a burning of a damn magic tree!"

George's mouth was all bloody, dirt mixing with the blood and tears on the outside of his face. He watched in horror as Tad, fury giving him an unbelievable strength, kicked the chain free and lifted the trunk of the dead cottonwood to carry it into the kitchen.

"*Mine!*" George said, and stumbled into the house and through the kitchen. He heard the stump crashing into the large fireplace, and already there was the snap of burning kindling.

Jocy was in there, and Tad straightened from the hearth, eyes blazing in the same fashion as the licking flames.

"*Can't!*" George said plaintively, and staggered toward Tad, who shoved him so that he fell across the room, striking the wall where the 23rd Psalm was hung. He sa down heavily, looking at the gapin cavity of the hollow stump facin out toward the room. The flame were beginning to leap higher an higher.

"Whiskey!" Tad roared. An Jocy, frightened, ran to the kitchen then reappeared with a bottle. Tac opened it and tipped it up, th liquor gurgling as he swallowed Then he turned to George. "There' your magic tree, dummy. And al the junk you ever put in it!" Hi neck was ridged with fury. He drank again, then looked down at the stump, burning now with greate heat and flames. Suddenly he dropped the bottle and fell to his knees, shouting, "The cans! He must have dug them all up behind that old man, and then—" He dove at the blazing trunk, howling when flames bit his hands. "Water!" he shouted. "Get some water!"

Jocy ran toward the kitchen in panic. Then the first cartridge exploded. Its soft-nose bullet screamed out of the fireplace from the burning sack in the hollowed stump where George had put it when he hadn't wanted that old coyote shot. It struck Jocy in the back. She screamed. Then the others began exploding. Three slugs slammed into Tad, who half rose, then fell down again.

George watched in awe, not even

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ling the pain of his wounds, the cans curled with the heat, d their contents flared with flame. : remembered in some remote sec- n of his brain that his father had ried those cans, all right, and ey'd been such pretty cans— inted red with pretty lettering d the tops and bottoms silver and ining. He hadn't cared about iat was inside them, old, dirty een paper. But he'd liked the ns, so he'd waited until his father d gone, then he'd dug them up and it every single one of them in his agic tree.

Now the magic tree was burning, it suddenly he didn't mind. He'd ever heard such cracking and opping and whistling in the fire- ace, with the flames leaping and mping better than he'd ever seen iem. The old lamp was lit and showing redly from within, but it also caught the reflections of the fire in its panels and against the beads.

Suddenly George felt very good. He could even remember, again, that part of the Psalm, ". . . and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

This must be the house, because it was such a pretty place here, with the fiercely raging fire, and the pretty lamp lighted red and reflecting the fire, and the explosions. He had a feeling, in that moment, that he was going to see his mother very soon—and his father too. Right here. Because this *was* the house. And then, as flying lead whistled across the room at his forehead, he smiled widely, shouting, "What do you say, Lord!" And he had never been happier in his life.

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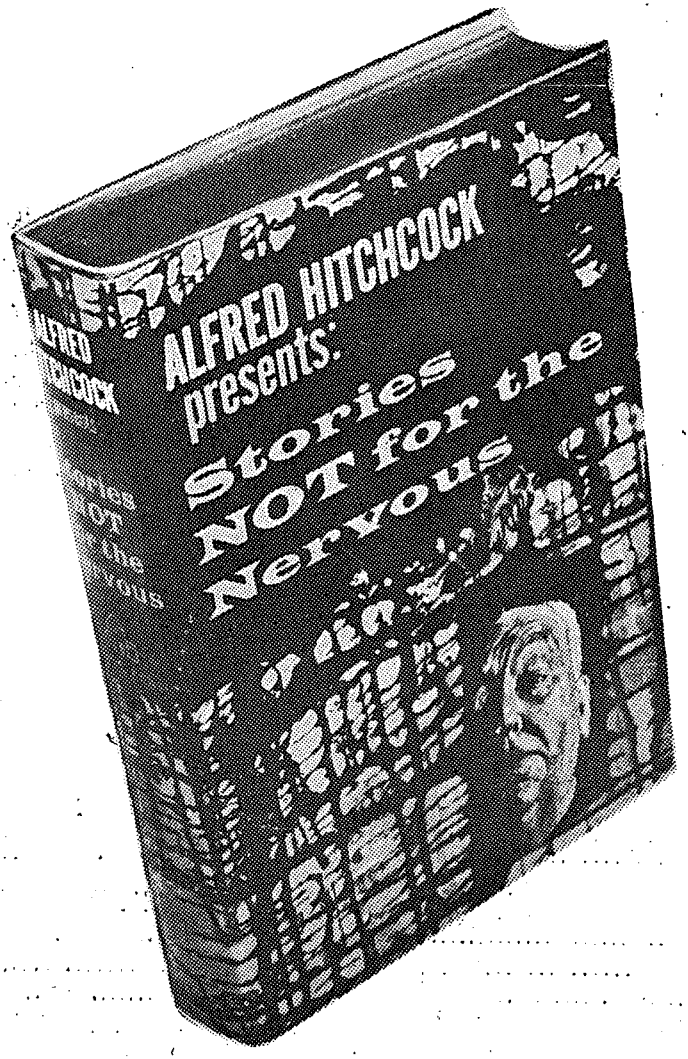

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